









## ***The Source of Death***

Philip Carver combines authorship with occasional discreet enquiry work, both as a hobby and in order to get plots for his crime novels. Leslie Foster, a once-famous playwright, appeals to Philip for help – he believes someone is trying to murder him by poison. Philip goes to stay at Foster's home and soon discovers that everyone in the household has a motive for murder. Even so, Philip cannot believe Foster's fear has any foundation. But then someone dies – of poison – and Philip finds himself plunged into a baffling puzzle. Each person in turn is considered, and each one *could* be guilty. The mystery is heightened by the fact that an earlier death *might* have been murder. With each move he makes Philip finds himself more and more confused as to the killer's identity. Gradually he is forced into a reluctant belief concerning one of the suspects.

*By the same Author*  
***Lead Him to Death***  
***Dead Man's Shoes***

# ***The Source Of Death***

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JOHN GIFFORD LTD.

125 CHARING CROSS ROAD

LONDON W.C.2

*First published 1914*

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY  
BRISTOL TYPESETTING CO. LTD.  
BRISTOL 2



To  
P. J. H.



## ONE

THE INVITATION wasn't one I'd normally have accepted. Indeed, I was surprised to be asked to the function. As a mere writer of thrillers one is not the sort of person with whom the members of the Junior Arts Club would wish to mingle. However, there was no mistake. It was addressed to me, 'Philip Carver', and they wanted me to be present at the annual award dinner.

'Shall I accept?' Myra Gresham, my secretary – she has other functions – obviously expected me to, and of course I couldn't resist the hand-written plea on the back of the engraved card.

*'Please, I beg of you to come.'*

It seemed that someone wanted to approach me for help. In addition to writing thrillers I do from time to time conduct a little investigation should anyone ask me to. I don't do this professionally; at least, not the way a private detective would. But if I am asked to conduct a discreet enquiry I do so on the understanding that I may make use of the details, adapting them as basic plot material in one of my books, if I so wish.

I always change everything, names, districts, and

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so on, of course, so that no one could be recognised. There aren't many people who know that I do this, but it's surprising how the word gets round. There must be the hell of a lot of people in trouble of one sort or another.

'Well?'

Myra was still regarding me patiently. She's always telling me I take ages to reach a decision on anything, no matter how trivial it might be, but I know what she's hinting at when she says this. Up to now I haven't accepted her proposal of marriage. Actually, it's more than one. Midge, as I call her, brings up the subject every week.

One day I'm going to say 'Yes', but I'm going to fight for my freedom a little longer.

'Well what?'

'Will you be going?'

'But of course.'

She nodded resignedly. 'Don't get into trouble.' Her tone implied that I would; she has small faith in my ability to look after myself when she is not present.

But when I attended the award dinner at the Junior Arts I had to chuckle. 'Junior' didn't apply in the sense of age. There wasn't a man on the committee who appeared to be younger than ninety, and most of the guests were eligible for the old age pension. They weren't what you'd term well-dressed; practically

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every dinner-jacket was green – from mould, not fashion.

The dinner was luke-warm, even the ices they served at the end. But the wines were excellent and as I was playing a game of 'Spot my Host', I managed to survive, although when it came to the speechifying I almost gave up. It was pathetic, I suppose, but I've very little time for the pretentious and I felt like getting up and walking out.

These mewling, senile old idiots imagined themselves to be sole arbiters of what was good in poetry. I don't know what type of rubbish they had selected for their prize in other years, but this time they'd picked on a melon-headed goon ancient enough to know better. He had, he informed us, discovered the true poetry.

It consisted of writing verse and then printing the words so that the last word in the line became the first, the penultimate word became the second, and so on until the first word became the last. This was, he informed the company, the only way to reveal the truth of life—by seeing it from the inside out.

His revelation was greeted with acclamation by all except me and three others. One of the three seemed unaffected except by illness; he was pale and sweating. The other two were glaring as though they wished the prizewinner dead and it didn't require great intelligence to work out that they were the ones who had been pipped on the post for the prize, so to speak.

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Well, that was it. A wasted evening among the self-styled intellectuals of the arts of the written word. Wasted, because whoever had sent me the invitation and begged me to go, didn't reveal himself.

But it's hardly fair to say the evening was useless, for in my trade *nothing* is worthless. There were some very fine character studies among those present. I particularly liked the secretary, whose upper set didn't fit at all tightly, with the result that when he said anything his speech was punctuated by a series of clicks as his top teeth fell on the lower set, which made it sound as though he was speaking Bantu now and again.

I hung around at the bar for some time and bought myself several drinks. I wasn't a member, of course, but as no one else offered to buy me anything, I had to pass the time somehow, and as I've said, the drink was excellent.

It wasn't until I decided to go back home that anyone spoke to me. I was in the hall, collecting my coat, when someone came up to me. It was the man who'd looked ill, and he certainly didn't look any better. His face was covered by a sheen of sweat and he seemed breathless as he addressed me.

'You are leaving, sir?'

'Yes.'

I stared at him keenly, wondering if this was my host, but I gripped his arm as he reeled, clutching at his stomach as though in pain.

'Are you all right?'

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‘I – would you do me the favour of seeing me back to my hotel, sir?’

He was much older than I, about fifty-two or three, I guessed. Tall, thin and with a proud expression, despite the obvious fact that he was suffering. I held him firmly. ‘You’re not well. Can I call a –’ But he cut me short.

‘If you would see me back to my hotel, sir,’ he gasped, ‘I’d esteem it a favour.’

I’m not kidding, those were the actual words he used, as though he was a character in a Victorian melodrama. But he was certainly sick and probably didn’t want to create a disturbance so I got him out into the street and luckily there was an empty taxi passing. I saw him enter the hotel and then got back into the taxi and went home.

Next morning Myra was keen to hear all about what had taken place and she was disappointed by what I had to tell her. ‘Do you reckon it was someone’s idea of a joke to send the invitation?’

‘I don’t know, sweetheart. There wouldn’t be much point – unless someone wanted me out of the way for the evening so he could date you?’ She wasn’t quite sure whether to be pleased or annoyed, but eventually smiled.

‘Was it dreadful?’

‘The usual sort of long-hair gathering.’

‘Poor sweet!’ She ruffled my hair, as though to assure herself it didn’t need cutting, then wandered off to deal with the day’s correspondence. She’d only

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been out of the room for half a minute when she came back hurriedly.

‘You don’t think it was a trick to get you out of the house, so it could be burgled?’

That was something I hadn’t thought of. Not that there’s a great deal to half-inch, but quite a number of Chelsea houses *do* get broken into, so I took a hurried tour. The five original paintings were still there and the only other thing of value – my wine cellar’s contents – had not been disturbed.

When I got back to the study Myra was answering the telephone and after excusing herself to the caller for a moment she covered the mouthpiece with her palm and turned to me. ‘It’s a Mr. Foster. Says you did him a good turn last night.’

It was the sick man. He was rather better now and wanted to come round and thank me in person. He’d looked me up in the book to get my number, so he said, and immediately I told him I’d be pleased to see him. Would he like to come round straight away? He said he would and that he’d be with me in fifteen minutes.

I put the receiver back and stared at Myra. ‘Most interesting. Your Mr. Foster is a liar, my dear.’

She took the news calmly. ‘He’s not my Mr. Foster, thank you. But why is he a liar?’

‘He said he’d looked the number up in the phone book.’ In point of fact my telephone number is ex-directory.



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It was precisely fifteen minutes later when the front-door bell rang and Myra went to admit my untruthful acquaintance. In the mid-morning light he appeared less yellow than he had done the previous evening. He wasn't sweating either, but as he shook hands with me I could feel his fingers trembling.

Myra settled him in an arm-chair then went off reluctantly to make coffee. I know she'd have loved to stay and hear every word, but I wanted my visitor to feel at ease. He was very expensively tailored and was dressed in rather too finicky a style to please me, but it looked as though he had money. What really intrigued me about him, apart from his being a liar, was the fact that his face seemed vaguely familiar, as though I'd seen newspaper likenesses of the man.

'Well, Mr. Foster, I trust you've quite recovered?'

'I'm in better condition than I was last night, yes.' His deep, slow voice was pompous and his choice of words slightly odd.

'Good.' I couldn't think of anything else to say. He was staring at me in a queer sort of concentration.

'You do realise who I am, Mr. Carver? I am Leslie Foster.'

He said the name in much the same way that someone might say 'I am Jehovah!', but after a second the penny dropped. Leslie Foster's name had been up in lights in the West End of London just after the war. He was the author of two of the most successful crime plays that had ever been written.

'Good Lord, of course!' I could have kicked myself

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for not recognising him before. The two plays had been masterly works, intricate and highly ingenious in plot; they'd each been record-breakers at the box office and he must have made a fortune from them. 'I'm terribly sorry, the name should have registered instantly.'

He gave a bitter smile. 'Don't apologise, Mr. Carver. I'm afraid anyone would have difficulty in recognising me nowadays.' He paused for what seemed a long time, then said: 'I take it that it is correct that you conduct – ah – amateur investigations on occasions . . . discreetly?'

'Who told you that?'

'It doesn't matter. What is important – do you do this thing?'

'Sometimes.'

'Ah!' He sank back in his arm-chair as though a burden had just been removed from his shoulders. 'You know, Mr. Carver, I'm a great admirer of your works. Oh yes indeed! You are one of the few good crime writers. I particularly admire your plots.'

This, coming from Leslie Foster, was a real compliment. It's nice enough to get praise from your fans – supposing you're lucky enough to have any – but when the praise comes from a fellow craftsman who is *good* at the job, then the words mean something. 'Very kind of you to say so.' I paused for a moment. 'You did send that invitation?'

He smiled faintly. 'Yes, I have to confess to that.'

'If I may ask, why all the secrecy?'

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'I had my reasons.'

'I don't doubt it, Mr. Foster. But I mean. Why didn't you say anything when we were in the taxi?'

He appeared to give it careful thought before he answered. 'Suppose I said my courage had failed me at the last moment?'

'But you've got it back now?'

'I'm not so sure.' He leaned forward, very earnest. 'You see, Mr. Carver, I'm a proud man. I don't like to be thought a fool.' He was proud all right; you could almost see it oozing from him. 'I don't like to expose myself to ridicule, Mr. Carver. But why I have come to see you is too urgent for delay.'

'Yes?'

'Yes, Mr. Carver. You see . . . I believe someone is trying to poison me. To murder me.' ~~26~~

## TWO

FOR A MOMENT I imagined I'd misheard but then I knew I hadn't. Foster was at ease now that he'd got the words out. He was staring at me calmly, almost calculatingly, as though considering what I might do.

'You did say someone was trying to kill you - to poison you?' He nodded and I went on: 'Then I'm afraid I can't help you. You should go to the police.' Or to a head-shrinker, but I didn't say that aloud. I suffered a moment of sadness; it always affects me when I come across anyone whose capabilities are failing, it seems to degrade humanity in some way.

But if he was getting empty on the top deck, then he disguised the fact remarkably well. 'I thought that would be your reaction,' he commented. 'Right at this moment you are probably thinking I'm mad, or going senile.' It was so close to the target that I almost flinched. 'But I'm not,' he went on, 'I'm as sane as you are.'

Well, that didn't mean much if one judged by some of the comments that had been made about me by various people.

'If you are sane, Mr. Foster, then you must know

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that this sort of thing has to be handed over to the police. I mean—Murder!’

He had an answer to that so smartly that I imagine he must have been rehearsing the scene. ‘Oh, I agree, Mr. Carver. I’d go to the police – if I had a shred of proof to give them. But it’s only suspicion on my part, you see. Nothing more. But if it goes on much longer without proof one way or the other, I’ll certainly go out of my mind.’

Myra came in at that moment with the coffee and while she poured it out and handed the cups round, I studied him. Myra hadn’t any intention of missing anything from then on. She gave me a look that I easily interpreted from past experience.

‘Do you mind Miss Gresham’s presence?’

Suddenly he became human. He beamed at her with obvious approval. ‘Certainly not. I should welcome the young lady’s presence. Beautiful girls are not so common that one dismisses them easily.’

Any woman would have gobbled up that sort of flattery and Myra was no exception. As from that moment she was on his side, and it occurred to me that Foster wasn’t quite so thick-headed as I’d believed. I said, as briefly and abruptly as I could : ‘Mr. Foster believes that someone is trying to poison him – to murder him.’ It shook her, but only for a moment.

‘You’re going to help him, Philip?’ She turned to the other man. ‘Mr. Carver’s absolutely wonderful.’ I could have shaken her.

But by the time he’d finished telling me his story I

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knew I *was* going to do my best to get him straightened out one way or the other. He was quite right, there didn't seem to be anything firm enough to offer as evidence; it was all too nebulous. I can't say that I was anywhere near convinced that someone was feeding him arsenic in his night-cap, but at least from his descriptions of the folks living in his house I'd get to meet some odd characters.

So, after making it clear to him that I was pressed for time – that my publishers, some producers and lots of editors were after my immortal prose and would brook no delay – I finally agreed to go and stay with him for a long weekend at his place in Buckinghamshire. I'd go alone. That way, if I found it deadly dull, Myra could send me a telegram saying I had to fly to Paris immediately to meet an American film producer who wanted to pay me scores of thousands of pounds to write a film script.

Foster didn't go into ecstasies when I said I'd go, but at least there was a reaction of sorts. An odd expression crossed his face and I was still trying to make up my mind what the expression signified, when he got up to go.

'I shall look forward to seeing you on Friday.' With that he bowed himself out. By the time Myra came back from the front door I'd changed my mind. Not that I imagined there was anything in what he thought, but in any case it wasn't my cup of medicine. Either he was bonkers or it was a matter for the police.

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'I was an idiot to say I'd go down to his place,' I said to Myra.

'But you're going?'

I knew I was. It's impossible to let Myra down, I find. It is a great burden in my life. When she looks as though she is on the verge of disillusionment over me, I give in without further ado. I tell you, she's a responsibility . . . and undoubtedly very good for me.

Foster's home came as quite a surprise; it was about three times as big as I'd expected, a long, Georgian building standing in about ten acres, on the far side of Great Missenden. The journey from Chelsea had been achieved at reasonable speed and it was exactly half-past three when I arrived. He'd told me what time to get there and I'm one of those people who turn up at the hour stated.

The weather promised an early Spring, the sun quite warm for March and the well-kept lawns in front of the house had just been cut so that they showed that lovely, stripey pattern I like so much on grass. There wasn't anyone in sight and there was a long pause after I'd rung the bell, for nothing happened.

I pressed the bell again after a decent interval. Again, no result. It began to look as though the Foster residence was one of those homes where guests were not expected to be prompt.

There was a large, ornate iron knocker on the door

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and I tried banging this. A heavy assault with the thing did the trick. Seconds later the door opened and a very pretty brunette, her clothes covered with a flour-daubed overall, stood and looked out at me, giving the half-smile of enquiry that told me she was not a member of the staff.

‘Yes?’

‘I’m Philip Carver.’

‘Yes?’ She still hadn’t got a clue.

‘Mr. Foster invited me for the weekend.’

It was a complete surprise to her and suddenly I was embarrassed. Not for myself, but because of the burning flush that sprang up in her cheeks as Foster’s voice made itself heard in the background.

‘Is that you, Carver? Welcome.’ Then, *sotto voce* : ‘Good heavens, Gwen, what’s the matter with you? Ask the chap in!’ There was a whispered exchange that I didn’t catch, then he pulled the door wide open and was smiling at me, hand outstretched. ‘Nice to see you.’ He turned to the flushed girl. ‘You haven’t met my wife.’

She was staring at me uncertainly, then she put out a slightly sticky hand. ‘I – your room isn’t quite ready, Mr. Carver. If – if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go and see to it.’ She turned away swiftly and hurried across to the wide staircase that led straight up from the middle of the wide hall.

Foster was speaking softly. ‘You must forgive my wife, Carver. Her ~~memory~~ is somewhat erratic at times.’



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Well, we all have our faults. Gwen Foster had good looks and a splendid figure. But it wasn't the faulty memory that surprised me. No, it was the fact that she was his wife. She was young enough to be his daughter; there was well over twenty years difference in their ages.

My host pretended to help me with my cases and when they were dumped in the hall he told me where to garage my car, coming with me so I couldn't make any mistake. The multi-space garage was at the rear of the building and we walked back round the house to the front. As we got in, Mrs. Foster appeared at the top of the staircase and called to me.

'If you'd care to come up, Mr. Carver?'

Foster nodded his approval and I mounted the stairs. She led the way along a corridor, then turned and pointed to the last door on the right. 'That's your room. I hope you'll find it comfortable.'

I don't think even the most difficult person could have found fault with the room. It was square, with a high ceiling whose plasterwork was decorated in dove grey and gold above panelled walls. There were two other doors in the room, one leading into a bathroom, the other opened into a walk-in wardrobe with sufficient hanging space for about fifty suits.

She came close to me. 'I'm sorry if I appeared rather stupid when you arrived, Mr. Carver,' she said softly, 'but the fact of the matter is that Leslie - my husband - Leslie's getting rather absent-minded at times.'

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I stared down at her. 'You mean he forgot to tell you he'd invited me?'

'Exactly.' She smiled as though in relief that an awkward moment had been dealt with. I kept my face straight.

'Won't it make things difficult? The catering, and all that?'

This time she laughed aloud; a rather pleasant sound. 'Good Lord, no! We've enough food in the house to provision a regiment for months.' She glanced down at the flour on her overall. 'If you'll excuse me for the time being? I'm doing some baking.'

The moment she'd gone I sat down on the window-sill and had a little think. Which one of them had the bad memory? It didn't seem likely that they both suffered from the same fault, but that wasn't the only improbable thing. I was still feeling surprised that she was married to the man who was my host.

But I didn't get a great deal of time to ponder; there was a knock at the bedroom door and Foster was there, come to collect me. He peered round the room. 'You've got everything? If my wife's forgotten something . . .?'

He looked in better shape than when he'd called at my place. There was a bit of colour in his cheeks and he didn't appear to be under any strain as he led me down to the room he called his study. It was about the same size as a tennis court, with an enormous desk set at one end on a raised dais. Anyone seated in the swivel arm-chair behind the desk could

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look out over the grounds. The ideal 'master of all he surveyed' set-up.

He very obviously was expecting me to say something flattering about the room and I managed to get a few words out that he didn't take amiss, although for my money I'd as soon have worked in the middle of Oxford Circus as in a room the size of this one. I like things cosy when I'm inventing my deathly prose, with all the necessary text books within arm's length and the walls near enough to make me feel snug. It takes all sorts.

The moment I ran out of words of praise for the room, he got down to business.

Apparently I wasn't the only guest. There were several other people staying for the weekend and he wanted me to keep an eye on them and tell him what I thought about 'em. There was a staff of two also.

I thought about it for a moment while he watched me keenly. Then I said: 'Look, I made a mistake coming here.'

'Why do you say that?' His words came out sharply, almost as though he was reprimanding me.

'I'd got the impression you wanted me to vet the members of the household. If the place is full of guests, it won't be so easy.' That wasn't what I was really thinking, of course. Somehow I'd got the impression that there were quite a few people living permanently with him – guests wouldn't have much chance to carry out a deliberate long-term policy of murder . . . always

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assuming that such a thing *was* going on. He looked sane enough, but you could never tell. Maybe I'd better sound out his wife about possible obsessions he might have?

'You're thinking that guests wouldn't have the opportunity to poison me.'

'Dammit! You're reading my mind.' I couldn't let the opportunity slip by, for already I was missing Myra and my home. Spending the weekend mixed up in this household was going to be an utter waste of time and I was trying to think up some excuse to leave when he laughed.

'What a relief! Carver, you're a smart man. Smarter than I'd hoped.'

He seemed to know what he was talking about, which made one of us who did. 'I'm glad you think so.'

'Oh yes indeed.' He was rocking backwards and forwards in his seat as though in enjoyment. 'I asked you along this weekend because we have exactly the same guests that were here when Gwen's mother died. Just over a year ago.' He paused. 'I think the old lady was poisoned.'

## THREE

I SPENT at least fifteen minutes soaking in the hot bath, pondering over what Foster had told me three-quarters of an hour earlier. I find hot water conducive to thought and although I knew really nothing of what had been taking place in the house I was already half-convinced that most, if not all, that Foster had said had been the product of a mind on the edge of . . . what?

Madness?

It didn't seem that there would be much point in trying to ask questions when I met the other members of the household, but that wasn't the thing that bothered me. What had me rather worried was whether I should warn the hostess of her husband's oddity. I mean. *If* he was losing some slates from his roof, might he turn dangerous? If he did, and I hadn't warned her, what would be my moral responsibility if he suddenly went completely loopy and started dealing out with hatchet-blows?

Fair enough. But there was also the consideration that it isn't usually done to tell one's hostess that her spouse is about to go round the bend . . . that he is already more than half-way round it. At that

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moment, something else occurred to me. Foster might be a practical joker, having me on.

Was it all an elaborate trick, to provide amusement for Foster and his friends? But no, surely it was all *too* elaborate for that? . . . What did one do? Pack up and return to Chelsea immediately? Or behave in the traditional manner of the English gentleman and carry on, pretending I hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary, no matter how odd the situation became? After all, I'd be leaving on Monday morning, at the latest.

'Hello there!'

I turned my head sharply. I hadn't heard anyone enter my bedroom, although the bathroom door was ajar. In the doorway stood a sad-eyed, bored-looking little man. 'I did knock,' he said. 'I was wondering if you'd have a tot of the hard stuff lying in your quarters?'

'I don't think we've been introduced,' I said, as calmly as I could manage.

'I'm Poddy Foster. A cousin. You'll be Carver?'

From somewhere behind him a deep, feminine voice made itself heard. 'Poddy, darling, don't be so bloody stupid. Of *course* it's Carver. Who else could it be? Hello, Mr. Carver. Are you decent? Not that it matters.' Before I could think up an answer she had pushed the little man aside and entered the bathroom.

'I'm Poddy's legal bag,' she announced. 'You can call me Belinda.' She was about forty, getting a bit

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fleshy but she was still an attractive woman despite the too heavy make-up. Her dark brown eyes were regarding me with some enthusiasm. 'My word, grandma, what big shoulders the man has . . . And those arms . . . Hoo! Real rib-crushers, aren't they, Poddy?'

The little man, however, seemed not to share her enthusiasm, he drifted back into the bedroom and she came over to the side of the tub. With a long, slender forefinger she prodded me. 'My, my! Real muscle.' She repeated the words in a loud voice for Poddy's benefit. I had the impression that only the thick layer of suds on top of the water prevented her from continuing her comments on my anatomy.

'And what is a real man like you doing at the Mortuary Hotel? . . . Not that I'm complaining,' she added hastily. 'Not at all. In fact I can tell you right this minute that I must see more of you.' Her smile showed excellent teeth; her eyes revealed no humour, only appetite. 'But for the moment I'll settle for a nip of Scotch, if you have any.'

Up to that moment I'd been wondering what the hell to say; I had found myself at something of a disadvantage, but something she'd said had aroused my curiosity. 'You call this the Mortuary?'

'That's right. Everyone in it dead or dying. Except me . . . and now you.' She was going to make some other comment or, for all I know, going to climb into the bath with me.

'There's a bottle of whisky in my brief-case,' I

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said hastily. 'It's down at the far side of the dressing-table.'

'Did you hear that, Poddy? The Carver man is a generous soul.' She lowered her voice to speak confidentially. 'I, too, am a generous soul. Remember that, won't you! It's my one virtue.' Her forefinger prodded my shoulder again, then she was gone. When, a minute later, I wrapped myself in my bath robe and went into the bedroom, the bottle of whisky had also gone.

I met the Poddy and Belinda pair again at dinner. She had a somewhat glazed look in her eyes; he was exactly the same bored little man. Foster wasn't present; he'd sent in his apologies, he wasn't feeling too well. There was one other woman I didn't know and Gwen introduced me. The stranger was a friend of hers, Maureen Chase, a rather faded blonde slightly older than our hostess. Maureen had a large bosom and wore a dress with a distressingly low vee. Nothing in her manner suggested that the ample display of rounded flesh was intended to stimulate male interest.

When we sat at table, Belinda was next to me. Her dress was in distinct contrast to that of Maureen, for it consisted of a loose skirt and a high-necked blouse buttoned right up to the neck. She did, however, feel my leg, her fingers appraising the muscles in my thigh.

The food was served by someone called Jackley,



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presumably a butler of sorts. He was elderly, slow without being dignified, and heavy-breathing. And, if I was any judge of character, he hated every second of the time he spent tending our wants. Not that mine were very demanding; the food was disappointing. I'd expected something rather special in such a household; instead it turned out to be white fish, overcooked, and with a very ordinary sauce.

Except for Belinda, none of the others seemed to find it of much interest, but she stoked it away as though she hadn't eaten in a long, long time. She also had the habit of upending her wine glass at frequent intervals and it seemed fairly clear that the lady had more than one strong appetite. As she fumbled at my leg again I made a mental note to lock my bedroom door when I went to bed – with dear Belinda on the *outside*.

Although the food was dully average, at least there was compensation in being able to speculate about the others who were at table. Gwen was immersed in her own thoughts, her forehead marred by the lines of a frown all through the meal. Maureen was indifferent to everyone other than our hostess; she was watching Gwen closely. But what emotion brought about such keen attention didn't exhibit itself. Maureen's face was blank of expression; only the movements of her eyes revealed her main concern.

'We take coffee in the garden room, Mr. Carver.' I'd been so deep in my own thoughts that I hadn't noticed they had all finished. 'If you'll excuse me

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for a moment,' Gwen said, 'I'll just pop along and see how Leslie is.'

Almost before our hostess was out of hearing range, Belinda turned to me. 'Don't pay any attention to Leslie's "illness",' she said scornfully. 'Our hotel manager's always putting on a little act to impress the customers.'

It wasn't the most gracious manner in which to speak of the man whose guests we were, but as neither Maureen nor Poddy made any protest, I kept my mouth shut, following them as they moved from table and into the next room. It was rather splendid, a mixture of living-room and conservatory. The walls and roof were mainly of glass, with several hundred species of cacti ranged around the place.

In the centre of the marble floor was an open space with cane chairs, settees and tables, with Jackley standing by ready to pour out our coffee. Belinda hurried ahead to get to one of the settees, settling herself full-length and giving a generous display of leg. I noticed that Jackley, despite his surliness, wasn't above giving the exhibition his attention.

'I understand you are a detective, Mr. Carver.'

If Poddy had chucked a grenade into the middle of the gathering, he couldn't have made more of an impression. Suddenly I was conscious that I was being studied by everyone as though they were using a microscope.

'Whatever makes you think that?'

'You mean you're not?'

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He was looking at me blandly, trying to appear at ease, but I could sense the tension behind the façade. I'd had a second or two to think, and I was trying to work out the reason for the phrasing of the question. Who could have told him the real reason for my visit? Leslie Foster wouldn't have done that.

'I'm interested in crime, certainly.'

My evasion only seemed to tighten the tension. Any idea I'd had of going home the following morning, was washed out right at that moment. Something was going on here and I'd have to do my best to find out what it was. But before I could develop the situation further, Gwen came in, looking even more worried.

'Leslie's had one of his turns,' she said hurriedly. 'Mr. Carver, he wants to see you . . . You won't stay with him more than a moment, will you?' she pleaded. 'He should rest . . . I've sent for the doctor.'

Well, there was no doubt that Belinda's sneering reference to an 'act' by Foster was completely false. He looked dreadful, white-faced and shaking, with an underlying tinge of greyish-yellow to his skin that made him look more than half-dead. He was lying down on a settee in his huge study, dabbing at his lips every now and then with a white handkerchief.

He must have told his wife that he wanted to see me alone, for she came only as far as the door, closing it behind me without coming into the room herself. 'I promised Mrs. Foster I wouldn't stay more

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than a moment,' I told him, but Foster brushed aside the suggestion. ✂

'You see?' he said eagerly, 'you see how brazen they are?'

For a moment I thought he was accusing the other Fosters, the cousin and his wife, but then I realised he didn't mean anyone specific. 'Look, Foster, I think the police should be told at once!'

'No!'

'It's the only sensible thing to do.'

'No!'

Despite his illness he put plenty of emphasis on the word and he looked as though he was going to burst into a raging temper. This time I spoke very gently. 'All right, then, give me one good reason why I shouldn't call them.'

'There's a little thing called proof, my dear fellow.' He saw I was going to object and went on: 'Please! All I ask is for you to find out who is poisoning me. I promise you, I'll do the rest.' I was still going to raise a protest when he retched. I interpreted his violent gestures to mean that he wanted me to go and to send in his wife. She was waiting in the next room and hurried in to him the moment I opened the door. I didn't need to say anything for he was being noisily sick. She shut the door firmly in my face and after a moment or two I wandered back to find the others.

Not one of them was sufficiently interested to ask how Leslie Foster was. Somebody had produced a trolley of drinks and Poddy had taken over the job

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of serving. He glanced at me as I entered. 'And what do Scotland Yard detectives drink?' he asked me.

I was a bit on edge, I suppose. I mean, the business in the study wasn't too pleasant, to understate as much as possible. Anyway, I was rude to the bald-headed little man. I swore at him, told him he was bloody stupid and so on, and then told him who I was. This isn't the happiest thing for an author to have to do. One always hopes – but rarely achieves the satisfaction – one always hopes that immediately your name is mentioned to someone, that person will cry out in wonder at having the great good fortune to meet 'the man who wrote that *wonderful* book'.

Oddly enough, he wasn't upset by the slanging I gave him. Instead, he seemed relieved. Of course, he might have been one of those masochistic creatures who adores such treatment, especially when administered by a big, strong man. But I doubted it. I was left wondering what crime he'd committed. There must have been something to make him so worried about detectives.

But now he was easier and began to pump me as to the state of my bank balance and my income. He seemed to assume that I was making pots of money; that being an author was the equivalent of owning a private mint. I did nothing to disillusion him and within five minutes he was trying to sell me a Georgian tea service. 'Nicest bit of silver I've seen in a long time,' he confided. 'I picked it up last week.'

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‘You deal in silverware?’

‘Anything. Antiques mostly, but anything.’ He lowered his voice. ‘Tell you what. Come up to our rooms. I’ll show you one or two things.’ His tone and manner implied that he would be prepared to let me have a bargain price.

‘I’ll do that sometime,’ I said, meaning no such thing. So far as I’m concerned, antiques are tatty, dingy, ugly or mere dust collectors.

‘No time like the present.’ He had his hand on my sleeve, pulling at it. For once there was a trace of animation in his expression.

‘Hey! I’m not going out at this time of night.’ He must have been a keen tradesman to want to go to his shop at this hour.

But it wasn’t a matter of going further than the first floor of the house, I discovered. Five minutes later I was in the suite that was occupied by Poddy and his wife. The rooms were not far along the corridor from mine, but they were larger and fitted out like miniature museums, with a hodge-podge collection of antique furniture, silverware, paintings and general knick-knacks.

‘Good Lord!’ I stared round in astonishment. ‘You don’t cart all this stuff here with you, surely?’

‘What the devil are you talking about?’ He seemed annoyed with me for having interrupted his sales talk. And then the truth emerged. He and Belinda had occupied the rooms for nearly five years. They were permanent, rent-paying tenants. ‘And Cousin Leslie

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charges a pretty steep rent too!' Poddy said venomously.

I spent the next minute or so trying to recall exactly what our host had said, and at the same time I tried to look as though I was taking in what Poddy was spouting. He was giving me a potted history of every piece in the room, then continued on into the bedroom. On the dressing-table there was a three-quarter empty bottle of Johnny Walker. It was probably the one they'd filched from my quarters, but he ignored it with aplomb.

Despite myself, I was forced into a sneaking admiration for the little squirt. By this time I was pretty sure he made a living from milking any sucker who came his way, but of course if one is in the antiques business, this is considered to be legitimate and, indeed, highly respectable. *Caveat emptor!*

I went downstairs again, after refusing a drink, to buy anything, and to loan him some money. Gwen was standing in the hall with a white-haired, upright old man who was patting her hand as though reluctant to let it go. She introduced him to me as Doctor Troodefor, the family physician. Either it was a trick of the light or his eyes were those of a much younger person, set in a wrinkled face. It produced quite a startling effect to see them glittering brightly, an intense blue, as he stared at me.

Apparently Leslie Foster had been given a sedative;

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the worst of the attack was over and he would probably sleep for many hours now that the worst had passed.

‘Nervous stomach, you know,’ the doctor stated. ‘Too much imagination, that’s his trouble. All creative types suffer more or less from the same thing.’

There didn’t seem to be any point in arguing, so I waited and watched her lead him outdoors, to his car. He put his arm round her and patted her shoulder before he climbed into his car and drove off. I got the impression that he’d have liked to do much more than merely pat her, but then decided charitably that I had a dirty mind and that I was imagining things.

Suddenly I heard Belinda’s voice and she sounded as though she was quarrelling. But at that moment Gwen came back into the hall. ‘I think I’ll have an early night, if you’ll excuse me,’ I said.

‘But of course! What time would you like breakfast?’ She was looking quite calm now, her former anxiety dispersed. Was it because Leslie was better? She wasn’t even bothered by the loud sounds that Belinda’s voice caused.

At that moment Maureen Chase came into the hall and I saw Gwen frown in perplexity. Was she wondering who Belinda was slanging? It could only have been Jackley and she was probably worried about the effect on one of the staff, although surely she should have been used by now to Belinda’s pleasant habits?

Maureen solved the minor mystery. ‘I’m going to



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bed,' she announced flatly. 'When that damned Belinda gets going and that Griffiths man comes over for a drink . . .!'

I saw Gwen start in surprise, then she excused herself and hurried off. Maureen moved as though to pass me but I turned and kept in step with her as we went up the stairs. 'Have you been staying here very long?'

For a moment I thought she was going to snub me, then she condescended to answer, although she looked straight through me and might have been addressing the banister. 'This has been my home for some years now. Good night.' She turned her back on me and marched – there was no other word to describe her progress – along the corridor to the right. I turned left and went to my room.

When I got inside I locked the door and as I got undressed I tried to make sense out of what impressions I'd gathered during the past few hours. But one major problem teased my mind for some time before I became too sleepy to think :

Who was Griffiths, and why had Gwen seemed so concerned at his presence?

## FOUR

I G E N E R A L L Y find that the first night in a strange bed is a bad one. Normally I sleep like a dead thing, but not on this occasion. There were the usual country sounds, magnified ten-fold it seemed, with various beasts on the prowl. But there were also human beings moving about. Two persons, a man and a woman, went past on the gravelled drive at one o'clock in the morning.

They sounded as though they were carrying on a fierce argument in whispers, and that they were trying to keep the noise of their footsteps to a minimum. Belinda and the man Griffiths, continuing their argument? I wished him joy, then began to drift off again into a light sleep.

A dozen times I woke, but when I felt that I could really settle down to unbroken sleep, it was time to get up.

I was alone at breakfast, except for Jackley who resentfully served me. It was a much better meal than dinner the previous evening and I stoked up, after which I felt in the mood to take a drive to see the surrounding countryside. Jackley said that his master was still asleep and that the others would not be in

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evidence before lunch. Maureen Chase had already breakfasted and gone out.

The old boy talked a bit towards the end of the meal. I'd told him I was leaving by Monday or Tuesday at the very latest and this seemed to reassure him. Maybe he'd thought I was another permanent guest for him to look after.

'Yes, sir,' he said in reply to my question, 'I've been here longer than anyone, excepting the master – me and Mrs. Jackley, that is. We entered his service when he bought the place.'

'When was that?'

'Nigh on twenty years ago, sir.'

That would be at the time he had just made his first great success in the West End. I wouldn't have dared take on a house of this size, not on one successful play. But Leslie Foster was obviously of sterner stuff; his choice had been a good one. There'd been his second huge success two or three years later. He must have made enough to live on for the rest of his life.

'Mr. Foster wasn't married then?'

'No, sir, he worn't.'

The answer was very abrupt and after he had made it Jackley stumped out of the room, leaving without even asking if there was anything else I required. The question appeared to have upset him, although why this should be so . . .? I mean, it was fairly obvious that Gwen wasn't old enough to have been married for twenty years. •

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So what had probably upset Mr. Jackley was the fact that Foster *had* married. Yes, it began to make sense. Here was a classic example of the pair of faithful servants, believing themselves fixed up in a situation that *could* mean they were virtually in control of the house. Then along comes the young bride and all their plans go down the drain.

But no! It might have done in Victorian melodrama; but not now.

When I got back from my short drive, Jackley was waiting for me. Foster wanted to have a talk with me as soon as I returned. 'The master is in the study, sir.' The old man was wearing a linen coat that had been made for a much bigger person and it made his shoulders look curved as he padded off to whatever task awaited him.

My host was looking even more fine-drawn when I went in to see him, there were lines etched by pain round the corners of his mouth. But despite all that he was seated at his desk, with several sheets of quarto typing paper scattered in front of him. Apparently he was trying to work.

'My dear fellow!' he said eagerly, but then remembered his manners as host and asked if everyone was taking good care of me. But a moment later he was telling me about this latest attack he had suffered.

'It's the worst one yet,' he told me. His rather haggard face housed eyes that regarded me with an

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odd intentness, as though he secretly hoped I'd already found an answer.

'You're fit enough to talk?' I asked.

'Of course.'

'Then let's start by telling the truth.' I wasn't prepared to waste any more time, even though he did look pretty sick. 'For instance, you gave me to understand that your cousin and his wife, and Maureen Chase were all week-end visitors.'

There was a long silence, during which he looked anywhere but at me. When he finally spoke his voice was thick, as though he found it difficult to speak. 'I - I'm sorry. You must forgive me. You - you want the truth. Very well, the truth is that I need the money they pay. It - isn't much, but it helps. This place takes a great deal of keeping up, and my income . . .' the words tailed off, leaving me feeling ashamed of myself.

As a fellow writer I should have been the first to appreciate the situation. You don't get a steady income if you are stupid enough to take up the profession of fiction. Only if you are exceedingly lucky do you make enough money to live solely from writing. And then the chances are that one year you will make *too* much in royalties - and the Inland Revenue takes most of it off you. And next year you may make less than a hundred pounds. It's the luck of the game.

'I'm sorry,' I told him. 'I didn't mean to pry.'

He took it very well. 'No need to apologise, Carver, I assure you. After all, if I'd been honest . . . But no

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matter. Doubtless there'll be a few other secrets you'll dig up.'

Now was the moment for me to back out gracefully – to tell him to have a private detective in. But – I didn't. Instead, I plunged.

'If you die, who benefits?'

He didn't even blink. 'All of them, to some extent.'

'What do you mean by "all of them"?''

'Harry and Belinda, Maureen, the Jackleys.'

'And your wife?'

'Of course. But she doesn't come into this.'

I didn't for a moment suppose she did, but if I was going to work out an answer, I couldn't have any favourites. 'Do they all stand to inherit substantially?'

'Only Gwen. The others don't get more than a few thousands, at most.'

'A few thousand *pounds*?'

'Naturally.' He appeared to be surprised that I should raise such a query, for he'd mentioned the sum as though it was a few shillings.

'They all know they're in your will?'

'Certainly.'

Well, well, well. It was difficult to imagine anyone liking the other Fosters, the cousins, sufficiently to leave them more than an empty whisky bottle. But Leslie Foster had certainly made himself a desirable victim. 'Why is Maureen Chase in your will?'

'Two reasons. First, she worked as my secretary for quite some time. Second, she's a friend.' He smiled. 'As a matter of fact, it was through Maureen that I

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met Gwen. So you see why I'm grateful to her.'

I was certainly learning plenty, although whether any of it was of use was another matter. 'Anybody else in your will?'

'Not yet. But I think I'll leave you my cuff-links, Carver. Would you care for them? As a matter of fact I've got quite a collection.'

Blast the man, was he making fun of me? Was there a special gibe in the words, or was this his usual manner? 'You must show them to me sometime,' I said lightly and went straight on: 'Who is Griffiths?'

'Henry Griffiths?'

'I wouldn't know.' He'd reacted to that one, all right.

But he was in command of himself again. 'If it's Henry Griffiths, then you mean the chap who runs the petrol station at the crossroads.'

I knew the place he meant. I'd almost called in there when I was out in the car, but then I'd decided I'd got sufficient petrol in the tank. So far as I could recall there were two or three pumps and a repair shop – not the sort of place one would have expected to be owned by a man who dropped in socially for a drink at Foster's home. Although perhaps he wasn't exactly welcome – maybe Belinda was in the habit of inviting him?

All that could wait, however. Outsiders weren't really important, if there was any truth in what Foster alleged.

It was at that moment I had what seemed to be an

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inspiration. 'Look, all you have to do is to change your will!'

'In what way, precisely?' He was still a touch pedantic in his speech, despite everything.

'Well, you could leave all your money to Gwen. Cut out everyone else and let it be known that you had.' Dammit, I was picking up his habit of precise phrasing.

He was horrified. 'I couldn't do that! It would be most unjust. Don't you see, I'd be punishing the guilty but I'd also be punishing the innocent.' Already my bright idea had dimmed considerably but he went on to dull it even further. 'Come to that, I might be punishing *all* the innocent and letting the guilty one reap all the reward . . . Not that I mean Gwen is responsible; of course I know she isn't. I was just using the example for the purpose of illustration.'

I saw exactly what he meant, but something else presented itself. 'Did anyone gain financially by your mother-in-law's death?'

There was a rather long silence. Obviously Foster had a definite opinion on this point, but whether he was going to reveal it to me . . . 'I don't want to stress it, but if I'm going to help you, Foster, you'll have to help me. I can't work in the dark.'

'Very well.' He nodded to himself, as though he was satisfied that he had made the right decision. 'I'd better tell you the whole story . . . I'll have to go back to the time just after I married Gwen . . . No, better start before that.' He paused, then stared me



straight in the eyes. 'Do you remember the Blinley case?'

Blinley. The name rang a faint bell somewhere in my mind. Then I recalled the scandal. 'James Blinley!'

'Correct.'

Yes, I'd got the details now. Blinley had been mixed up in a bankruptcy; something unsavoury, whatever it was. He'd died hopelessly in debt – blown the top of his head off with a shotgun.

'Gwenda's father was Blinley's partner. He ruined himself trying to put the mess straight, then died. His wife, Gwen's mother, took it very badly. She'd been in poor health for years and I told Gwen to bring her here to live. She was a semi-invalid and spent most of her time in bed. Gwen nursed her and generally looked after her, but her mother died after a time.

'It was a bit of a shock, although the doctor had warned us that it was a possibility that she would die suddenly – that she might collapse. If she didn't, then she might linger on for ten, fifteen years.'

Foster stared down at his intertwined fingers as though bracing himself for what was to come. 'There – there wouldn't have been any doubt in my mind,' he said at last, 'except for the rubies.' He lifted his head and gazed at me directly. 'According to Mrs. Bray's will, Gwenda inherited everything. Unfortunately, this didn't mean very much. There was no money; a couple of hundred pounds at the most. But there were supposed to be some other items – jewellery.

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‘From time to time Bray had given his wife presents of pieces of jewellery. Most of the items had gone towards trying to clear the Blinley debts. But there was a major piece still in Mrs. Bray’s possession – or so she said. It was a ruby bracelet, and according to what she was always telling Gwen, the bracelet was worth at least seven thousand pounds.’

‘But it wasn’t?’

He shrugged. ‘I don’t know. No one does. You see, my mother-in-law’s illness made her a bit – eccentric. She told Gwen that the bracelet was locked in a case that she kept in her room. No one ever *saw* the rubies, you understand. And when she died, there was no trace of them.’

‘What’s your theory?’

‘For what it’s worth, Carver, I believe the bracelet *did* exist – that it was still in her possession until she died.’

‘And that someone stole it?’

‘Yes.’

‘The murderer?’

‘That is what I believe, as I’ve already told you.’

‘You mean someone killed her to gain the bracelet; or disposed of her to prevent her discovering that the thing had been stolen?’

‘One or the other.’

‘Then why the hell didn’t you go to the police?’

‘How could I? Good heavens, man, I had no proof that the bracelet existed – there was only her word.

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And the doctor signed the death certificate without a question.'

For the first time there was a false note in his words. The reason he'd just quoted wasn't the real reason why he hadn't done anything. Why hadn't he gone to the police? Because he suspected Gwen? Was that it? But it was too preposterous to entertain. Gwen wouldn't have needed to steal the bracelet; at her mother's death she would have inherited it. Nevertheless, perhaps Foster *had* got this idea in his mind.

'You say Mrs. Foster – Gwen – used to nurse her mother?'

'Yes.'

'Did she feed her – prepare her food?'

'Sometimes. Look here –'

I interrupted him. 'Just a moment. Does Mrs. Foster prepare *your* food?'

But he wasn't going to co-operate any longer. He was trembling with anger. 'I'm not going to stand this one more minute! You're as good as – as accusing Gwen!'

'I'm making no accusations, Foster. All I'm doing is to try and find out if there's anything in what you suggest.'

'It isn't Gwen. Good God, do you think I don't know my own wife!'

He looked as though he was working himself up into a rage; it was time to change the line of questioning. 'Is there anyone who is your enemy?'

'In this house, you mean?'

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'I was wondering about the Jackleys.'

'Nonsense. They've been with me getting on for twenty years.'

'I understand Mrs. Jackley does most of the cooking?' That shut him up for a while. You could almost sense his mind at work, thinking it over, then rejecting the idea of a servant being involved.

'No.' Foster shook his head. 'Not the Jackleys.'

I was getting a bit fed up with the business. 'All right, then, tell me who you think is the one.'

This time he was silent for so long that I thought he was never going to answer. But at last he brought himself to speak. 'I'm making no accusations, as I said before,' he began slowly, 'but I sometimes think that Maureen doesn't care for me too much.'

Maureen.

The last person I'd have considered, but of course Foster knew her a damn' sight better than I did. I tried to get something more out of him but now he really was finished and after a few minutes I went off to think it all over.

They were certainly a great bunch of characters, ones that could be useful from any writer's point of view. Not that you would write them up as they were – that way trouble lies. No, what to do is to take a bit from one, a bit from another, and so on, then mix them all up and you have a crowd of new people, different, but retaining among them all the quirks of character that had existed in the originals.

I still didn't for one moment believe that Foster's

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suspensions were true, but when you listen to people telling you what they think about other folk, what they never realise is not that they are revealing the nature of the persons about whom they are speaking, but that instead they are displaying themselves.

Take this instance of Maureen. Foster said she didn't like him. That probably meant that the truth was that *he didn't like her*. Well, that was okay. I mean, a man doesn't have to love every other human being with whom he comes in contact.

But Maureen had been his secretary, and after she'd ceased to be that, she'd stayed on in the house. Why? And how was it possible for her to do so? According to what the cousin had said, it wasn't cheap to live at Foster's place. Maybe she'd been more than just a secretary to him? Maybe she still was? Perhaps he gave her cheap accommodation, for past or present favours? None of it seemed very likely, but I made myself a promise to find out more about her at lunch.

I had to postpone these particular enquiries, for she was out, Jackley informed me. Poddy and Belinda were also missing, I was happy to see, and the meal was quite pleasant, although Foster, at table for the first time during my visit, ate almost nothing. Gwen fussed over him, making sure that he had what she said was good for him, and generally cossetting him.

It was a quietly pleasant domestic scene, the loving wife glad to see her mate recovering from an indisposi-

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tion, and more than ready to chat light-heartedly to the guest. I could see why Foster had scoffed at my suggestion that Gwen was the one responsible for doing him harm. All through the meal I tried to find something wrong with her manner – some evidence of strain, but there was nothing.

Foster was on edge, but that was hardly surprising after the attack he'd suffered the previous evening, and once he muttered savagely under his breath as Jackley bumped against the back of his chair. He didn't say anything to the servant: he didn't have to, for I caught the expression on the butler's face. Jackley must have heard his master's words and for a moment I thought he was going to pick up one of the knives and plunge it into my host's back.

So. Jackley hated his employer.

It was shaping up as one of the cosiest households I'd ever visited, and after the meal ended Foster declared he was going to rest, so I decided to get out for a breath of fresh air away from the place. The weather was quite warm for the time of year and it was dry, so I went for a walk, going down the road and heading in the direction of the crossroads, where the garage was.

There was nothing to be seen as I strolled past it. The double doors leading to the service shed were open, but no one was in sight. I crossed over the main road and continued on for a mile before I turned back. There was a little traffic on the main road, but nothing, not even a solitary car, in the one where I was

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walking. But when I re-passed Griffith's Garage, as it was sign-posted, I noticed one of the double doors had been shut and that, inside, was a white sports car which looked very like one I had seen parked in Foster's garage.

Fifty yards further on the road – it was more of a lane, really – curved, and when I was out of sight of Griffith's place I went and stood looking over a five-barred gate at some cattle in a field, while I wondered how soon I could decently get back to London – and to Myra. The activity in the meadow was equalled by that of the traffic. In the fifteen minutes I leaned on the gate, one motor-cycle passed.

I've never been bored in my whole life, but that afternoon I came near to boredom. Being away from my own place, on such a fatuous errand, was a terrible waste of time. In future, I'd be much more fussy about choosing an inquiry from those I was offered. I could have packed up and left straight away but one thing stopped me : I felt sorry for Foster.

It was obvious that the poor devil had written himself out – this is the constant nightmare of most writers – and as a result his imagination was turned, not to more fiction on paper, but to fictionalising and dramatising his daily life. If you've a mind to, you can put the most sinister interpretation on to the most innocent of actions.

Now I was no longer on the edge of boredom; I had a splendid moral problem to solve. Which would be the more honest – well, no, perhaps that wasn't

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the word to use . . . which would be the kindest – yes, that was it – which would be the *kindest* thing to do? Go home at once : Tell Foster that I thought he was up the pole : Pretend that I was trying my best to solve the mystery?

I was still debating with myself when I got back to Foster's place and instead of going into the house I went to get my car. Although I'd got enough petrol to see me well on the way back to Chelsea when I left, if I bought some more it would help with the illusion that my return was much closer in time. Besides, if I had any luck I'd meet Griffiths.

But when I pulled up at one of the petrol pumps, no one came to serve me. I blipped the horn but it didn't have any effect. There wasn't a sign saying that that place was closed – indeed, both the shed doors were now open, so presumably there was someone around.

From where I was I couldn't see into the shed so I got out of the car and strolled over to see if anyone was inside. The repair shop was empty of people, and the white sports car had gone also. Just inside the shed there was an office partitioned off. There was no one in the office, which was the usual mess of tins of oil, tyres, sparking plugs and spare parts all smeared generously with grease. I was just about to turn away when I saw something on one of the shelves whose space was mostly taken up by a battered kettle, a milk bottle, several tin mugs, what was presumably a tea caddy of sorts, and a large, green tin.



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The tin was marked POISON.

‘Well, well!’

If there was anything in the container it seemed hardly the place to keep it. At that moment I heard the sound of a motor-horn; perhaps the garage proprietor was returning. But as I got outside I saw the white sports car disappearing along the lane towards *Red Trees*, Foster’s place. It was being driven by a woman, but all I saw was the peacock blue headscarf she wore.

I was just about to get in my car and drive off when another vehicle, a towing truck, pulled up. A stocky, dark-haired man got out and came over to me. ‘Sorry if I kept you waiting,’ he said. His voice was deep and pleasant. ‘Old Charlie’s supposed to be here, but you never can be sure of him.’ He was beside me now, rather handsome and charming.

‘Would you be Mr. Griffiths?’

He nodded and smiled. ‘Right first time. And I suppose you’ll be the writer, Philip Carver?’

So someone had been gossiping – not that there was anything wrong in that. I admitted my identity and watched him put some petrol in my tank. He was just locking the cap back on when a shambling figure emerged from the repair shop.

‘Charlie, you blasted old devil!’ Griffiths roared. There was no rancour in his voice and the blue-overalled man grinned vacantly.

‘I bin out back, Mister Griff’.

‘Snoring your head off, I suppose!’ The garage

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owner winked at me to show it all part of an oft-repeated act.

As I drove away I reflected that Griffiths was the first tolerable male I'd met in that corner of the country. It must surely have been an act of charity on his part to give employment to the elderly Charlie, who clearly was not a second Einstein.

Later, after dinner at Foster's house, I discovered that the white sports car belonged to Maureen Chase; that she had a private income inherited from an uncle, and that she did part-time, unpaid organising work for several charities.

I managed to avoid being drawn into a game of poker with the cousin and Belinda, dodged the request for a loan from Poddy and went to bed early after an exhausting day of doing practically nothing.

This time it was easier to drop off to sleep, but I didn't have an unbroken night's rest, for at 1 a.m. I heard two people go quietly past under my window. Although they walked almost silently I was woken by the angry sibilance of their arguing. A man and woman quarrelling, exactly as on the night before. .

## FIVE

I GOT BACK to Chelsea on the Monday in good time for lunch and spent half an hour in the kitchen, where Myra was cooking the meal, being cross-examined by the dear girl. Midge is sweet; she is a most efficient secretary, a cook of *Cordon Bleu* standard, and she has a hundred other virtues. But she also has a weakness : she's apt to be a teensy bit jealous, and if I am out of her sight for more than a day it is always difficult to convince her that I have not been seduced by half a dozen sex-ravening females.

On this occasion I was let off lightly; I think it must have been obvious even to her that I had not spent a wildly exciting time at Foster's home. Of course, I kept quiet about the way in which Belinda had introduced herself to me – any sensible man wouldn't relate such an episode to another woman, if he wanted to be believed.

But I nearly got caught.

I was catching up with my correspondence in the late afternoon when Myra came in and stood glaring at me accusingly. It was an expression I know of old, but as my conscience was clear, at least on this occasion, I merely beamed up at her innocently.

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‘Did you want something, darling?’

‘Philip, you’re drinking too much.’

She couldn’t have been serious. But she was. I only had to look at her to realise that. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ I announced virtuously. ‘In the past twenty-four hours I’ve had precisely two drinks – and one of those was with you, before lunch.’

‘Then what happened to the bottle of whisky you took with you?’

‘Oh, that! Belinda came and bor–’

Myra’s grey eyes glinted. ‘*Came* and borrowed it?’

I did a lightning think, sorting out the best words to use. Not a week passed but what I read the dear girl a lecture about the correct usage of English, generally taking the writings of current British novelists in order to point out examples of faulty use of the language. It’s an odd fact that American novelists employ much higher standards in their English than do most of the so-called ‘top’ English novelists, who either don’t know their own tongue or don’t bother to respect it.

In this particular instance I’d made it fairly obvious that Belinda must have visited me to get the whisky; my use of the word ‘*came*’ gave this away. Fortunately my inventiveness didn’t let me down. ‘Yes, came and borrowed it . . . I told you Poddy came to my room to introduce himself. He brought her with him.’

‘To be introduced, or to borrow your whisky?’

I laughed. ‘Well, now I come to think of it, I suppose he brought her along with him because he

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thought it'd be more difficult for me to refuse.' It sounded so good that I was pleased with myself – indeed, I almost believed myself.

Myra's forehead was wrinkled by a frown. She wasn't disapproving now, merely uncertain. 'How long was he in your room before he asked for the stuff?'

'I told you earlier. They were his opening words. "have you got a dram of the hard stuff" . . . something like that.'

'And he asked you immediately?'

'Yes.' I was trying to understand what she was getting at. 'What's all this in aid of?'

'I was doing your unpacking, and when I saw the bottle had gone from your brief case . . .'

Now I saw what she meant. When I go to stay anywhere I carry a bottle of whisky with me. I very rarely take a drink from it, but the point is that whether or not I open the bottle, I always keep it in the brief case. I mean, I don't leave the bottle in full sight, to provide temptation for chambermaids and suchlike.

'I get you,' I said. 'You're quite right, the bottle was out of sight.' How, then, had Poddy known about it? He *must* have known, to make his opening remark such a request. And the only way he could have known was if he or Belinda had searched my room previously.

'Midge, you're a smart girl.'

'So long as you remember that.' She was pleased with herself – as she had every right to be – and forgot to cross-question me any further.

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But although Midge was in a self-congratulatory mood, I was far from being so. I should have worked that one out for myself. I mean, it was so damned obvious. At least, it was now.

When Myra had gone back to her own tiny office I wrote my bread-and-butter letter to Foster, thanking him for an interesting and entertaining week-end. When I'd said goodbye to him he hadn't pressed me to come again. Altogether I'd been surprised at his attitude when I'd told him I hadn't uncovered anything; he'd seemed indifferent.

Now, of course, it was obvious to me why he had been like that. He'd realised what a fool he'd made of himself. His obsession had gone. And when it had he clearly would not want me around; my presence would remind him too much of how stupid he'd been, asking me down to investigate a chimera that existed only in his over-worked imagination.

Tuesday turned out to be one of those days. By 9.15 a.m. I was in a film producer's office, discussing a possible script-writing contract. The meeting went on for three hours, with all the interruptions that are part of the normal proceedings when you are dealing with anyone in the film world.

Someone rang him from Paris, then another call came in from Berlin. The studios rang up three times with various queries, he had to advise a designer, placate a star, and make false promises to half a dozen

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different actors and actresses. Amongst all this he managed to find time to talk with me and discuss the 'property' he wanted me to script. When I mentioned money, though, he went all cagey.

So at last I got up and walked out. London is full of these ex-Hollywood types who talk glibly in tens of thousands of pounds, and either haven't a dime to pay for anything, or are shysters who try to get the work out of you on promises alone, and who have no intention of paying you sixpence.

Lunch I had with an American publisher – and American publishers are, as a rule, pleasant to meet and even nicer to do business with. Then, at four o'clock, I had an appointment with a television producer who was a fan of mine and who wanted to do something about bringing one or two of my books to the small screen.

When I reached the television producer's office the atmosphere seemed a bit strained. He wasn't exactly biting his tie, but neither was he giving me much attention and the conversation we had was desultory, to say the least. His blonde secretary, whose dress was much too tight and much too short to restrain and decently veil her ample proportions, brought us in two cups, both cracked, that contained Brown Windsor tea, and when she had departed, he lifted his head and faced me.

'The fact is, old man,' he mumbled, 'things haven't worked out too well.'

'What things?'

## THE SOURCE OF DEATH

‘Well, not to put too fine a point on it – I’ve just been fired. They tore my blessed contract up!’ His voice sounded as though he was incredulous at such behaviour. Then he brightened a bit. ‘Not that it will affect us, old man. I’ll get a job up the road and then we can put your stuff into production.’

I murmured something appropriate, but I’d heard this several times in the past, from various people, so that I wasn’t too sanguine. Then I put the cup of doubtful liquid aside, got up and left after wishing him the best of good fortune. I rather thought he’d need it, although I didn’t say so, naturally.

When I got out into the street I remembered I’d promised to drop in to have a word with the literary editor of one of the Fleet Street newspapers. There was just a chance he might still be at the office, so I looked round for a telephone. As I should have known, he’d left; gone home. Maybe I should follow his example. But the moment I stepped out of the booth the heavens opened and I went to move back into the kiosk to shelter from the sudden, torrential rain. But out of nowhere a fat, militant woman had materialised and she beat me to it, shoving past and then, safely inside, turning to glare defiantly at me.

Five minutes earlier there had been plenty of taxis available; now there was none, and by the time I got one I was soaked to the skin.

At home, a hot bath put things right. After it I



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got into pyjamas and dressing-gown, made myself a meal from the stuff Myra had left in the fridge, then settled down to start the day's work.

I'm always amused by those people who assume that a writer's life consists of travelling, of going to parties, of going out for morning coffee, for lunch, or to a party. It never occurs to their simple minds that a writer has to spend a few hours every day actually *writing* – if he wants to continue to be able to pay the bills, that is.

So far that day I'd spent about seven hours over business matters; now I was preparing to spend another three hours, bashing away at my typewriter, then another hour in revision. The secret of being able to endure such long hours was a simple one : I enjoyed my work.

But this evening I wasn't going to be allowed to get on with it. I'd only just begun the first page when the door bell rang, and went on ringing. So, sighing, I got up and went to answer it. A very large young man in a macintosh greeted me deferentially. 'Mr. Carver, sir? Mr. Philip Carver?'

'Yes.'

'I'm a police officer, sir, and I'm making some enquiries relating to the death of a Mr. Henry Griffiths.'

## SIX

HARDLY believing what I'd heard, I invited the young man in. His name was, it appeared, Tranor, and he was a very new detective-constable. He was rather damp – it was still raining – and he cheered up considerably when I offered him a beer. I got it for him, then listened to what he had to say.

Henry Griffiths' body had been discovered that morning, by his employee, Charles Johnson – old Charlie – when the man arrived to start work.

'You mean the body was at the garage?'

'That's right, sir.'

'Go on.'

'Well, sir, according to our information you talked to the deceased two or three days ago.'

'On Saturday.'

Tranor produced a notebook and jotted down the bit of news I'd just given him. '. . . Saturday.' Up to that moment I'd been shocked to hear of the man's death, but now I was beginning to wonder why the hell the police had come to see me in connection with it.

'Look,' I said, 'I know you're only doing your job, but why pick on me? I'd only spoken to him

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once.' And then I knew. 'He was poisoned, wasn't he!'

If Tranor hoped to gain promotion, he'd have to learn to control his facial expressions. At that moment his jaw was hanging loosely open as he stared at me. But at last he remembered his official status. 'Poisoned, sir? What makes you think that?' His attempt to be casual wouldn't have fooled a nit-brain.

'There was a damned great tin of poison on a shelf, right next to the tea things. He must have got some in the tea.'

'A *tin* of poison?'

'That's right. Weedkiller, probably. I remember thinking what a damn' silly place it was to keep the tin.'

'I see, sir. And when was it you noticed the tin?'

I explained what had happened, but he wasn't interested in that. What he wanted was the time I'd seen the tin. 'Oh Lord, I couldn't be accurate to the minute,' I said. 'At a guess, it was about three-thirty, give or take a quarter of an hour.' My visitor made another note, then sat staring at the open book in his hand. Suddenly he got up.

'Thank you sir,' he said politely. 'You've been most helpful.'

'I have?' But he refused to rise to the bait and I saw him out. On the doorstep he thanked me again, then walked off into the drizzle.

When I got inside again I had too much to think

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about to be able to settle down to writing any more for the time being. Now that the detective had departed I realised that I should have asked more questions but it was too late now. What really concerned me was that the police should have moved so quickly, and worked so thoroughly.

I mean, had they set out to trace *every* person who had known the dead man, no matter how slightly? But that was only one aspect of the puzzle. What really was worrying me now, was the odd coincidence about poison. Leslie Foster *thinks* he is being poisoned; Henry Griffiths *is* poisoned.

Coincidence? Or something more sinister?

In either case, what did Philip C do?

The solution was fairly obvious. I had to get more information before I could make up my mind. It wasn't much after nine, so I put a call through to Leslie Foster's home. He might have heard more from the local police, and unless he was ill or asleep, he would tell me at least something of what I wanted to know.

His voice was very calm when I heard it over the wires. 'That you, Carver? I thought I might hear from you. The news has got to you, of course?'

'I've just had a copper round asking how well I knew Henry Griffiths.'

'Very commendable. Our police are very efficient.' His voice was full of dry sarcasm. 'And what did you tell your visitor?'

'Nothing much. How could I?'

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'Um!' There was a pause, then : 'Quite a coincidence, wouldn't you say?'

'It had occurred to me.'

We were both fencing, and I knew it. What he wanted to do was to ask me down there again; for my part, I wanted to suggest I re-visited him. Probably he'd be too proud to ask, so I did it.

'Do you think you'd be able to find me bed and board if I happened to drop over?'

'My dear fellow!' There was a world of grateful warmth in his voice. 'You've no idea what it would mean to me. I - I've been half going out of my mind in the past few hours. You see, it's almost certain Griffiths was murdered.'

'How do you know that?'

He spoke hurriedly. 'Someone coming in. I'll tell you when you get here. Good night.' I heard the click in the earpiece as he replaced the receiver at the other end and I was left staring indignantly at the phone. Had ever a man been left with such a tantalising question unanswered? I was sure I shouldn't get a wink of sleep, wondering about it.

But I'm one of those people whose character is so blameless that I normally drop off to sleep within a minute of settling my head on the pillow, and tonight was no exception.

When Myra arrived for work she was surprised to find me dressed, and packing a suit case.

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‘Are you all right, darling?’ she asked anxiously. I knew her concern was exaggerated – that she was being a little sarcastic, but I ignored it; that’s the thing that makes her really wild.

‘I’ve been invited to stay in the country.’

‘Where?’

‘At Leslie Foster’s place.’

For once she wasn’t too sure whether I was pulling her leg – a delightful pastime, her limbs are most shapely. ‘When was this arranged? Last night? Or last week-end?’ There was a bit of an edge to the last sentence and I dropped my pretence, telling her what had happened.

‘Murder!’ she said aghast. ‘But Philip, you can’t get mixed up with that! Leave it to the police.’

‘Don’t worry, sweetheart, I won’t do anything silly. I’ll be quite all right.’

‘Philip! Suppose there is a murderer down there? Someone who’s already poisoned the mother-in-law, and now this garage chap. If you go rooting around you might stumble on something – and whoever it is might go for you next!’

The poor girl was really scared, but all the same I didn’t care terribly for her choice of words. It didn’t sound as though her faith in my detective abilities was very great, if she expected me merely to ‘stumble’ on something. And I wouldn’t be ‘rooting’; I’d be conducting a subtle enquiry.

However, because she was upset I didn’t correct her over these matters of usage of English. It was

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very touching that she was so concerned, but rather humiliating that she had so poor an opinion of my being able to look after myself.

She came running out into the street just as I was going to drive off. Without saying a word she handed me my razor, toothbrush and toothpaste. I took them humbly; there didn't seem to be much point in explaining that I could easily have bought some new ones, once I'd found I'd failed to pack those items.

With another shouted word of thanks I put the car in gear and moved off before it occurred to her to state that she would accompany me to Foster's home. I knew that if I hung around for even another couple of minutes, she'd think of the idea. But if there *was* some maniac spreading arsenic in people's diets, I didn't want her there, to be in possible danger.

Myra is too precious to risk in such a way. At least, she's too precious to *me*.

I had driven only about five miles when it began to drizzle, the fitful wind whirling the mist of rain in every direction. The weather grew steadily worse until I reached the crossroads where I had to turn off. Griffiths' Garage was closed and looked dreary and drab as I went slowly past. There was nothing to indicate that it had, up to the previous day, belonged to a man whose personality would have been acceptable in any West End gathering.

But perhaps I was being unduly morbid. Now I thought about it, most of the West End gatherings I'd been to were open to any and every queer type. Not

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that I went to many parties, but I'd attended enough to make me want to stay away from any more.

It takes all sorts.

Foster himself was at the door to greet me. He looked very much better in health and it occurred to me that he was the type of person that thrives on death.

I was given the same room and he stayed with me to chat while I unpacked. The first thing he told me was that the police would be coming along to see me, later. •

'I told 'em you were coming.'

'I don't see how I can possibly be of any help to them.'

'Well, anyway, they're going to give you the third degree.'

How odd it was. When first I'd stayed with him, only a few days ago, he'd been somewhat pedantic in speech and manner, as he had been when I'd met him at the Junior Arts Club dinner. But now all that was gone; he sounded more like an out-of-date American tough guy.

'If the police are going to question me, perhaps you should put me in the picture.'

'I'm not sure that I can. I don't know much. Just that Griffiths was found dead yesterday morning, presumably poisoned. They – the police – think it's murder because they can't find any container the stuff might have been in. . . . Oh, and they think he died late on the Monday night.'



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He got up to go and look out at the weather. The rain had stopped now and he turned to look at me. 'Would you object to taking a stroll in the grounds? There's plenty of time before we eat, and I want to go and have a look at what Jackley's doing in the greenhouses.'

'Jackley does the gardening as well?'

Foster chuckled. 'Only the bits he likes. But when he first came here he was in the garden full time.'

I regarded him steadily for a few seconds. 'I must say, Foster, you look greatly improved in health.' It was almost as though I'd slapped him and I cursed myself for being so tactless as to remind him of his fears.

'I – yes, yes, I – I'm feeling much better.' But now he didn't look it. Once again his face was lined by anxiety and in an effort to get round the brick I'd dropped, I was over-hearty as I hustled him out of the room to take the stroll he'd suggested. As we went out of the front door Maureen went past in the white sports car, taking it round to the garage at the rear of the house.

'Was Miss Chase friendly with Griffiths?'

He seemed surprised. 'No, not at all. If anything, she disliked him.'

It wasn't unexpected. Maureen didn't seem to like anyone much. But as Foster and I strode towards the greenhouses I wondered if the police knew that she'd been to see the dead man on the previous Saturday.

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But that was unimportant. I suddenly realised that we were walking underneath the windows of my room, as Foster stopped and pointed out something to me.

The ground to our left was smooth lawn, with a belt of rhododendrons following the line of the Foster boundary, about a hundred yards away. Ahead and to the right at the rear of the house were formal rose gardens and beyond them in front of us, the kitchen garden and the greenhouses. On the far right was a patch of thin woodland, the grass tall among the trees, and it was to this patch of woodland that Foster was drawing my attention.

‘That path runs down to the main road.’

‘I didn’t know your grounds went as far as that.’

‘They don’t. But there’s a regular path, a sort of right of way that comes out just above Griffiths’ Garage, by the bus stop.’

There was a queer emphasis to his words and I knew why he had brought me out. It wasn’t to show me the greenhouses, or the garden, but to point out that path. He probably knew it was being used at night, and hoped that I’d heard people going in that direction in the small hours. It was almost certainly the route that Griffiths had followed when he popped in for a drink, late at night.

Did Foster know of or suspect something between Maureen and the garage man? Was the playwright trying to show me clues without actually naming them? Or was I imagining the whole thing?

We had passed the rose gardens now; they were

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probably very beautiful later in the year, but right now they were bare and uninteresting. I don't care for formality in garden layout; much nicer to see things growing in clumps and patches, as though they'd planted themselves by accident.

But now we were in the middle of the kitchen garden and Foster was busy telling me what all the trees, bushes and beds produced. It sounded as though they grew sufficient stuff to supply not only the house, but also the local market. In one corner of the vegetable patch there was a small, wooden hut and Jackley was standing inside it, watching us. Even from that distance I could sense the resentment with which he regarded us.

'Everything in order, Jackley?'

'Yes, sir.' The words sounded deferential enough, but if looks could have injured . . . !

They started talking technicalities; something to do with tree spraying, which didn't exactly enthrall me as a subject, and I moved away a yard or so, looking round. And then I saw it, right in front of my nose, on a shelf inside the shed : a large, green tin of weed-killer, with the word POISON on it in large letters.

On the way back to the house I tackled Foster about it, but he was surprisingly unconcerned. 'Of course there's poison in the shed, my dear fellow.' He laughed. 'This is the country, you know. There isn't a house within miles that doesn't have poison of one

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sort or another. Toxic sprays, powders, insect killers, rat paste, arsenic for getting rid of wasps' nests – the lot. That weedkiller we've got in the shed – I'll bet you there's some of that in practically every house in the county.'

He was right, of course, although I somehow hadn't thought of the country in that light before. But when you did give it some thought, it soon became obvious life in a city isn't one-tenth so potentially lethal, despite traffic and armed thugs. -

We had just finished lunch and I was going with Foster to his study to take our coffee, when Jackley, now in his house dress, informed me that there was a detective gentleman who wished to have a word with me. I smiled slightly at his description of the caller, but only until I saw the man. Detective-Inspector Warren was very expensively dressed and his manners and voice matched.

'Ah, Mr. Carver. How very good of you to see me. I must apologise for interrupting your pleasure –' His large, smooth face crinkled into a slight smile. His light-grey eyes regarded me warmly, as though meeting me was a great pleasure; one to which he had looked forward for a long time.

'That's all right, Inspector. Only too glad to be of service, although I'm afraid it's rather a waste of time asking me questions.'

'I wonder if it is?' His tone was gentle. 'You may

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be right, sir, but you never know. There may be just a little something . . . something you've almost forgotten, something you considered unimportant . . .'

Suddenly I took a dislike to the man. He was too sure of himself, too smooth, apparently too near perfection in looks and manner. I have never cared for a man who dresses too well.

'Such as?' I asked abruptly.

'Well, sir, I wonder if you noticed anything in particular when you went into Mr. Griffiths' office?'

Blast him, how could he possibly know that? 'Who said I'd been in his office?' But even as I asked, I knew. It could only have been old Charlie.

'You *were* in that office, sir, were you not?' Still the same silken politeness.

'As a matter of fact, yes.'

His smile widened a fraction. 'Splendid.'

'I went in to see if there was anyone who could serve me with some petrol. But there wasn't, and I was just going to drive away when Mr. Griffiths came back, driving a towing truck.'

'Exactly what we have been told by another witness, sir.' Warren beamed at me as though I'd just moved up and become Head Boy in the school where he was Headmaster. 'Now, *did* you see anything unusual in the office?'

'A tin of poison on the shelf next to the tea things.'

'Ah, yes!'

'You know about it, of course?'

'Of course, sir. Unfortunately, it contained sugar.'

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It was one of Mr. Griffiths' little jokes, sir. Some folk find that sort of thing very amusing.'

I knew it only too well. I'd been to one ghastly party where the sole joke was that the host had bought some mugs that bore the legends: 'Cocaine', 'Arsenic', and so on, and had served our drinks in them. 'Well, then, Inspector, I don't think I can be of any more help. I saw that tin, and the mugs and the teapot, but if there was anything else of significance, I didn't see it.'

But despite my protestations, the Inspector took me through my story another three times. Although I didn't like him, I had to admire his persistence and care. They didn't unearth much that was relevant, but at least Warren – Ferret would have been a more appropriate name – did extract the fact that, the first time I'd gone past the garage, Maureen Chase's sports car had been there. Not that the information did him any good; Maureen used the place to get petrol and for repairs and service work. She called in there two or three times a week.

The Inspector had just thanked me, and had gone from the room, when I saw a raincoated figure pass the window. The woman was wearing a headscarf and I recognised it from its vivid colour. It was the one that had been worn by the driver of Maureen Chase's car when I'd seen it pass Griffiths' Garage. But the woman who was wearing the scarf now wasn't Maureen; it was Belinda.

Did the fact have any significance? Hell, no! A

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score of people must have called there since Belinda's visit when I'd seen the car there.

Easy enough to say that to myself, but what about the quarrel that had taken place between Belinda and the dead man? And was Belinda the woman I'd heard go past under my bedroom window in the early hours, conducting a fierce but quiet row with a man – who must surely have been Henry Griffiths? If I'd been a little more inquisitive; got out of bed to have a peep, tried to decipher the words, then I'd have known a little more than I did now.

Should I volunteer the information about the quarrels to the Inspector? On the whole, better not. Unless I found out more and realised that the incidents were significant to the crime that had been committed. Foster was the only one who could help in this respect, so I sought him out. I found him in his study, sitting in front of his typewriter, but the quarto page inserted into the machine was blank.

'No, no, you're not interrupting me!' he said eagerly. 'What did you make of our Inspector?'

'Not my type, but he seems fairly smart.'

'Yes, but not smart enough, I think.'

I hadn't gone there to discuss Warren, so I got down to business. 'Was there anything going on between Griffiths and Belinda? That you knew of?'

'*Belinda!*'

He seemed really surprised and shook his head very decisively. 'You're on a false trail there, Carver. She wouldn't look at him.'

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‘He was good-looking, and he’d got plenty of charm.’

‘But no money.’

Foster smiled grimly. ‘Belinda would sleep with a wooden-legged Patagonian – provided he was wealthy.’ His smile broadened. ‘Even I had to make it very clear to her that I was not in the market for her – charms. And I suppose she’s been sounding you out? . . . I really must apologise, Carver. I should have warned you about dear Belinda.’

‘I can take care of myself. I’m a big boy now.’

Oddly enough, Foster was in a light-hearted mood. In his shoes, I’d have been rather more depressed. I mean, there definitely *was* a poisoner in the locality – and maybe Foster hadn’t been imagining things. ‘As I said, I can take care of myself, Foster, but what about you? If you’re right, and your name is on the victims’ list . . .?’

‘Well?’

‘Look,’ I said, ‘what does the Inspector say? Does he think someone’s trying to kill you?’

‘My dear fellow! How could he possibly know that?’

‘Haven’t you told him?’

‘Of course not! There’s no proof. Carver, that’s why I asked you here. To *find* proof.’ He was very earnest now, and for a further quarter of an hour he tried to impress on me that I was his only hope.



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An hour before dinner I had a bath, first locking my bedroom door in case Belinda should decide to visit. In the hot water I tried to make up my mind what to do. I knew very well that I should pack up and go back to Chelsea, Midge and normality. But much as I wanted to get back home, I also didn't want to let Foster down.

'Balderdash!' I said aloud.

I was trying to kid myself. The real reason I wanted to leave was because I was out of my depth . . . not in the bath water but in a poison case. Contemplating the next meal was not a joy. Although it was highly improbable that anything would happen while the police were making their enquiries, there was a slender chance that someone might add a touch of lethal flavouring to my food.

However, it turned out that the dinner that evening was the best meal I'd had at Foster's home. I started cautiously but as everyone else was tucking in, I forgot my fears. Well, I didn't exactly forget them, but I managed to push them into the background of my thoughts.

Even Foster himself was eating a reasonable amount, although it looked to me as though Gwen was forcing herself to eat. I remembered now that at lunch she took hardly any food, and it struck me that she was pale and strained. It was very quiet at table; Jackley's heavy breathing was the loudest individual sound as he padded behind our chairs.

Immediately the meal was over Gwen excused her-

## THE SOURCE OF DEATH

self and left us. Perhaps it was Mrs. Jackley's night off and the hostess had to go and wash-up the dinner things? The others wanted me to play bridge but I wasn't having any. To me, cards are a bore. Jackley went off and Foster told me that if I wanted anything more, I'd have to help myself, for the servants were off duty. So, as I'd nothing better to do, I went in search of the kitchens, to see if I could lend a hand, drying the china, always assuming Gwen was washing them.

Gwen was in the kitchen all right, but she wasn't doing anything more than sobbing her heart out.

## SEVEN

I DIDN'T INTRUDE, of course, although I wondered what had made such an effect on Gwen. Foster was in better health than I'd seen him, so it was hardly likely that her tears were being shed over this. Then what? Griffiths' death? If I'd gone in to her and offered solace, I doubt if she'd have confided in me, so I went back to join the others.

They were in the middle of the first rubber when Foster threw in his hand, muttered an apology, and hurried off in the direction of his study, one hand pressed to his stomach.

'Is he all right?' I asked.

Belinda stared up at me as though I was a simpleton. 'Of course he is. He just wanted to draw attention to himself. That's why he timed it for your entrance.'

The other two didn't say anything, but it looked as if they agreed with her. I wasn't so sure myself; I recalled only too clearly his ghastly appearance on a previous occasion. 'As Mrs. Foster isn't here, hadn't someone ought to make sure he isn't ill?'

Poddy looked at me, blank eyed. 'If you'd lived here long enough, friend, you'd recognise the act by now.'

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‘I don’t think it is an act.’

‘Then why not go and do your daily good deed, sonny?’ It was Maureen Chase who said that, and I was staggered to find she was glaring at me with obvious loathing – perhaps hatred. What in hell had I done, to earn such antagonism?

‘Yes,’ I said as lightly as I could manage, ‘I think I’ll go and do just that!’

I was still wondering at the sudden revelation of her feelings concerning me when I reached the study door. I knocked, and Foster called out in rather a weak voice.

‘Is that you, Gwen?’

So even his wife had to knock to gain entrance to the *sanctum sanctorum*! ‘It’s Carver.’

‘My dear fellow, come in, come in.’ He sounded genuinely pleased, but when I opened the door and saw his face, I felt a surge of anger against the other house-guests, even though they were paying guests. Foster was clearly ill, his face covered with a sheen of sweat.

‘Shall I telephone the doctor?’

He waved the suggestion aside. ‘I’ll be all right. Ate too much veal, I think. But if I have a dose of my wonder-powder . . .’ He pointed to a wall-cabinet mounted in one corner. ‘I wonder if I could trouble you . . .? The water, and the green tin.’

I went to the cupboard and opened it. Two of the four shelves were filled with first aid kit and on the third there were some medicine bottles and a tin of

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anti-acid powder of a well-known make. There was a glass, but no carafe.

‘There’s no water here, Foster.’

‘My wife must have forgotten it. You know, her memory . . . !’

Under his instructions I got the water from a tap in the tiny lavatory that led off the study. Then I watched him mix himself a dose and drink it. It could hardly have had time to reach his stomach when he gave an enormous belch.

‘Ah, that’s better!’ He handed me the tin to put back. ‘Not exactly the sort of stuff you’d want to take in company,’ he said with a weak attempt at humour. ‘But I wouldn’t be without it. If it weren’t for that . . . !’

I wasn’t feeling at all happy. In my opinion it was more than indigestion from which he was suffering, although I didn’t believe he was being poisoned. No, I was pretty sure he’d got an ulcer, and if he didn’t take more care of himself the chances were he’d be dead before too long.

He was peering at me from under the handkerchief he’d got pressed against his forehead. ‘You think I’ve got ulcers,’ he said. It was uncanny, as though he’d read my mind.

‘As a matter of fact, I think it’s distinctly possible.’

‘No. I wish it were as simple as that. But I haven’t got an ulcerated stomach. That was the first thing I thought of and I got the old Doc to give me a thorough check. No, there’s no ulcer.’

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Was he telling the truth? Even a real detective wouldn't have been able to decide.

I chatted to him for another twenty minutes, then he more or less dismissed me by asking me to find Gwen and get her to take him a carafe of water, so he could have it at hand on his desk. 'I get very thirsty at times,' he explained.

It took me several minutes to find her for she was still in the kitchen, checking over the contents of one of the cupboards and with a shopping list on the table. When I told her what her husband wanted she looked surprised. 'But he's got his carafe,' she said. 'I took it through to him myself.'

'Someone must have moved it after you'd taken it to him,' I said.

'No one would do that.' She was quite positive, quite firm. 'I'd better go and have a look. I recall putting it in the corner cupboard. I *always* put it there.' Was she being so emphatic in order to impress me – or to convince herself? It wasn't the sort of situation in which I could argue, so I kept silent and was about to return to the sitting-room when she opened the door of one of the cupboards and gasped.

'I could have *sworn* . . . !'

Smack in the front of the cupboard was a cheap glass carafe. She gave me a quick look and it seemed to me that there was more than a hint of fear in it. Not that she was frightened of me; it must have been that the realisation of her absent-mindedness scared her. Foster had said that she was that way inclined;

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maybe she had a secret worry that her brain was failing? Some people can work themselves into quite a state over such things.

Without another word she filled the carafe and hurried off with it, leaving me to trail behind her. Poddy and Maureen Chase had driven down to the local pub, but Belinda was in the sitting-room, the half-empty whisky decanter conveniently to hand. Judging from the time it took her eyes to focus, Poddy's wife had already taken a fair amount of alcohol.

'Done your good deed, as dear Maureen would say?'

The words were a bit slurred. 'Yes.' I wasn't too keen to get involved, but already she was pouring me a drink.

'Come an' sit here.' She patted the sofa she'd been lying on but I had no wish to be within reach of her roaming hands.

'Thanks, but I think I'll stand.' I took the drink from her and retreated to a point where my view of her was more modest.

'Why did you come back here, Philip? I mean, it isn't as though you knew Griff . . . So why are you here?'

'I'm helping Foster.'

'Lel - Leslie?' She made it at the second attempt. 'That's a laugh. He's written out and he knows it.'

Well, she may have been half-drunk, but it hadn't dulled her shrewdness. Was she in the right mood for

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a confidential chat? It was worth trying. 'You don't like him?'

'Who the hell does!'

'If you don't like him, why do you stay here? I mean, it isn't cheap. You told me that yourself.'

So far as I was concerned, it was a perfectly simple question, but it had a surprising effect on her. She swung her legs down from the sofa and glared at me. 'I loathe and detest the bloody place. Yet I can't leave it! *Can't*, you understand! I'm chained here.' The last words were muttered as though she was speaking to herself, and once she'd said them she got up and walked out of the room, her gait just a little unsteady.

Dear me, the fatal Carver charm with women didn't seem to work so far as the inhabitants of Foster's house were concerned. But I felt easier now that she had gone; for all her faults, Belinda was a damned attractive woman physically. Whatever had made her marry a little squirt like Poddy? And was the fact that she *was* married to him, the cause of her drinking so much?

I turned to look as someone came in at the other door. It was Gwen, looking harassed. 'Leslie's had one of his turns again,' she said, staring me straight in the face. 'Oh, he's all right now, but he told me specially to let you know he'd been sick.' She perched on the arm of a chair opposite mine. 'Why should he insist on that? You're not a doctor as well as being a writer, are you?'

There was no dodging the issue and I had to think



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up a fairly plausible explanation within about two seconds. Fortunately, my imagination coped. 'I was kidding him earlier, I'm afraid,' I said. 'I told him that he was inventing his illness, the upsets, in order to skip work. I'm sorry, I know it isn't the case, but you know how it is.'

'There's no illusion about his sickness,' she said seriously. 'He really does get ill.'

She was worried and, I judged, ready to talk to someone, so why not me? It was worth an attempt. 'What about getting the doctor to have a look at him?'

'He won't have him. He laughs at the suggestion.' She hesitated. 'It – it's almost as though he was *afraid* to see the doctor. But that's ridiculous. About a year back he spent two or three days having a complete check-up.'

'What was that for?'

'An insurance policy, I believe.'

So! Was she ignorant of the truth, or had she forgotten? The second alternative was the more charitable and so I decided to accept it. Gradually I led her on to tell me about herself and about the past few years. She talked freely enough, although there was no mention of Griffiths. In fact, I came to realise that there was no word of anyone outside the establishment; Gwen appeared to have no friends. I tackled her about this and she frowned.

'Lonely? Not really. There's enough to do keeping the house running. And of course, Mother was with me . . . !'

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I'd been wondering how to get round to this. 'You must have found it a great strain,' I said. 'Leslie told me how devoted you were to looking after her.'

She smiled briefly. 'I don't suppose he told you how kind he was himself? Having her here and all that.'

Bit by bit, the story of Mrs. Bray's illness and death emerged. Apparently Foster had insisted that his mother-in-law came to stay with them. He had wanted a professional nurse, but Gwen had turned the proposition down.

'Mainly on the grounds that we couldn't afford it,' she told me frankly. 'It's an expensive business, and as I was well able to take care of Mother . . . besides, it was a joy to look after her. She was little or no trouble.'

She became silent as she brooded over the past and I was afraid she wouldn't start talking again unless I managed to prompt her.

'I understand she died suddenly?'

There was no reaction, only a sad nod. 'Suddenly, but not unexpectedly,' Gwen agreed. 'The doctor warned us that she might go at any time, or that she might live for years.'

Apparently Mrs. Bray had died in the evening, a couple of hours after Gwen had fed her a bowl of broth. Of course, that could be made to sound suspicious enough, but it hadn't caused the doctor any doubts; he'd signed the certificate and the dead woman

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had been buried in a churchyard a couple of miles away.

‘It was a shock, naturally, when Mother died, but I suppose it was really a mercy. Poor Mother! She’d had a lot of trouble in her lifetime and it had left its mark.’

‘Your husband did tell me something of what had happened,’ I ventured. She made no reply and I was going to add something when we heard a door slam, and muffled voices. Then there was the quick, heavy steps that I knew were made by Maureen, coming nearer. Gwen got up as the door opened and Maureen came in.

‘I really must go and see if Leslie is all right.’

As Gwen left, Maureen came to glare at me accusingly. ‘Have you been upsetting Gwen?’ she demanded. ‘She looks terrible.’ I didn’t much care for her tone, but I tried to be polite.

‘She was telling me about the time when her Mother died.’

‘Oh!’ It stopped her for a moment – but only for a moment. ‘That damned man!’ She said the words so vindictively that I almost imagined she was going to accuse the playwright of having murdered his mother-in-law, but it wasn’t quite that.

‘That blasted husband of hers!’ So she didn’t like him, and she didn’t like me. Maybe she objected to men. ‘You know what he did? Made her bring her mother here, so she’d have the trouble of looking after her! *Made* her! I know Gwen thought her mother

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would be better off in a nursing home, where she could have proper attention.'

Well, it was certainly a different version from Gwen's. 'I thought Gwen enjoyed having her mother to look after?' I said.

'She loathed every minute of it.'

'I didn't get that impression from her.'

'You wouldn't. For instance, I don't suppose she told you the whole story.'

'You tell me, then I can judge.'

Maureen didn't exactly fall into my subtle trap; she'd have told me anyway. And it was certainly interesting. For while I'd gathered that Mrs. Bray's illness had been physical, according to Maureen's tale the trouble was mental. 'Mrs. Bray was as nutty as a walnut tree bearing a bumper crop,' she stated emphatically.

'She was mad?'

'Yes.'

'Violent?'

'No, nothing like that. Of course, it wasn't surprising, considering what she'd been through. You know they lost all their money?'

'I had heard.'

'Yes, I'll bet you have. Dear Leslie, no doubt . . . Did *he* say his mother-in-law was out of her mind? I'll bet not . . . But I was talking about Mrs. Bray. Did you hear about the rubies?'

'The ones that were lost?'

'Ah, so he *has* told you!' She was peering at me

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in triumph and I could have slapped her face. 'But did *Gwen* tell you about them?' -

'No.'

'Then I will . . . The famous ruby bracelet. Mrs. Bray was supposed to keep it in her room. It was the only piece of jewellery she'd managed to save from the wreck of the family fortunes. That's what she told *Gwen* - her own daughter, mark you! - and *Gwen* believed her. But when the old girl died, you know what? . . . The bracelet was coloured glass, worth about thirty bob.'

There was something wrong here. 'You're sure of this?'

'I saw it myself.'

According to Leslie Foster, the bracelet had been lost or, if I'd understood him correctly, it hadn't existed. I tried to recall exactly what he'd said to me about the thing, but my mind was confused. Maureen's story implied . . . what?

'You mean Mrs. Bray had sold the real bracelet, and got this other one as a substitute?'

She shrugged. 'Who knows? All I can say is : *Gwen* thought she was going to inherit a seven thousand pound bracelet. But she got thirty bob's worth of coloured glass instead.'

'You'll forgive my doubting your word, but are you quite sure that what you saw was a fake?'

Now she was laughing openly at me. 'Maybe I might have been fooled. But not Poddy. You couldn't trick him over precious stones.'

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‘Gwen showed him the bracelet?’

‘He’d been on about it for ages – he and Belinda. How they’d love to see it; you know what I mean. And then, after Mrs. Bray died, Gwen showed them the bracelet.’ She paused for a moment, recalling the incident to mind. ‘You know, that was the first time I’d ever liked Poddy. The poor little devil! I can see his face now. He was in a terrible state, trying to bring himself to tell Gwen the thing was a dud. He was positively writhing with embarrassment – and that was something I’d never have thought possible for him.’

I tried to picture Poddy looking embarrassed, but couldn’t manage it. So far as I was concerned, he was the most brazen hard-case I’d met, without a grain of sensitivity. ‘Did Leslie know?’

‘About the fake bracelet? But of course.’

Later, up in my room, I tried to make sense out of all the things I’d been told, but it was very difficult. The whole thing hinged on whether there *had* been a genuine ruby bracelet in Mrs. Bray’s possession when she came to live in her son-in-law’s home. If there had, then someone might have pinched it and substituted the dud one.

Any one of the others in the house *could* have done such a thing. The Jackleys, Maureen, the other Fosters, even Gwen or Leslie. It would have been fairly easy, once they appreciated that they had only to fool a mad

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woman who was ill. But what would have been the point? To raise capital? Well, the one person who didn't need to do that was Gwen. She'd have inherited in any case.

So far as she was concerned, more likely that she'd conceal having the real rubies, and produce the fakes, to avoid having the cousins scrounging from her. But no, that was surely a bit too involved. Leslie might have taken the bracelet; he could certainly do with the money it would fetch. But if he'd been the thief it seemed hardly likely that he'd draw attention to Mrs. Bray's death.

I mean, if he hadn't told me of his suspicions, I wouldn't have known a thing. Come to think of it, though, I was damned if I *did* know a thing! It was all such a mess I couldn't sort out a single lead. So I switched out the light and went to sleep.

## EIGHT

N E X T morning I could see things a little more clearly. Foster had told me that everyone in the household would benefit financially when he died. All of them, he'd said, would inherit several thousand pounds each. At the time it hadn't occurred to my stupid brain to wonder how that much money was available. Foster certainly wasn't getting much in the way of royalties – if, indeed, he was getting any at all so long after his plays had been written. And the sale of the house wouldn't fetch much over sixteen thousand pounds, not even at today's prices.

So it should have been obvious to me from the start that the money was going to come from the insurance policy he'd taken out, three years back.

And what I wanted to know was whether the policy had been his own idea, or if someone had talked him into it – someone *who had already planned his death* !

I went in to have a chat with him just before lunch. He was pale and weak, but wasn't in any pain, so I plunged straight in.

'Who made you decide to insure your life, Foster?'



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The question startled him. Then after a moment he said : 'No one.'

He was a poor liar; it would have been obvious to anyone that he was not telling the truth. But I knew exactly how to handle the situation; I'd been thinking about it since before breakfast. 'It was your wife, wasn't it?'

For a second or two it looked as though he was going to deny it violently, then his expression changed and he managed a feeble laugh. 'Has Gwen been telling you that?'

'No.'

'Then what on earth makes you think -'

I interrupted him. 'Don't let's face away from the problem, man. It's *your* life at stake.'

It seemed to me that for the first time he really grasped what the consequences might be. Although what I'd said was obvious, it looked as if he'd never realised the implication before. 'My life!' He gulped, putting a hand to his throat as though trying to keep from being sick.

There was no doubt he was frightened; it wasn't an act, for suddenly his face was gleaming with sweat. 'Look,' I said, 'you asked me up here to help you, but if you won't talk . . .?'

That did it. As soon as he had wiped his face dry, he leaned back looking defeated. 'All right, Carver, I'll tell you . . . Poddy does a bit of insurance work on the side.'

*Poddy!*

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I didn't have time to think this one out, for there was a knock on the door and after Foster had called : 'Come in,' Gwen entered. She was wearing outdoor clothing.

'I'm just off shopping, dear,' she said to him. 'Is there anything you want?'

'Not today, thank you, Gwen.'

'Nothing for your medicine cupboard?'

'No, thank you.'

She turned to smile at me. 'Anything I can get you while I'm out, Philip?'

'No, thanks.'

'Then I'll be off.'

I found myself staring at the closed door after she had gone out. She hadn't fussed over him, hadn't even asked how he was. Was that because she didn't want to do such a thing in front of me? Or because she didn't really care? Certainly she'd looked as though there was nothing in the world that could bother her. But she presented a very different appearance when Foster was having one of his turns. Then, she looked worried to death.

Foster made a sudden, impatient noise and got up. He held out a car key. 'She's forgotten this.' And he went hurrying after her before I could offer to take the thing. When he came back he was chuckling. 'One of these days she'll forget her name and address.'

The tiny incident was, I suppose, amusing to some extent, although it hadn't made me smile for I was

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slightly annoyed with my lack of observation. When you make a living by writing you become an observer of things and people. You don't just glance at them, the way most people do; you train yourself to *see*. Yet I hadn't noticed Gwen leave the key on the desk. I must have been so busy looking at her face that I saw her, as it were, out of context, aware only of her face.

Foster hadn't noticed my abstraction for when I looked at him he was still smiling slightly, head bent and with his eyes staring blankly at the desk-top. Somehow he conveyed the impression that he was affectionately recalling incidents of Gwen's absent-mindedness. For a brief space of time I wondered if such a shortcoming made the person more attractive to his or her beloved.

Midge, for example, had one or two tiny faults that made her seem all the more desirable to me. One does not love a person only because they are perfection in all things. And, so far as I was concerned, Midge loved me. Lord knows, I'm full enough of faults.

It was at that moment I had a nasty suspicious thought. 'Tell me, Foster, does Gwen buy all your medical stuff?'

'Of course.' It was his turn to be suspicious. 'Why do you ask?'

Ten minutes earlier I'd have said it was because what bits of evidence I had seemed to point always at Gwen. But now I knew Poddy had been the one to bring up the matter of insurance . . . well, I wasn't so sure. I passed it off as lightly as I could.

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‘Oh, nothing really. I just wondered how many people have access to your indigestion powder.’

‘Theoretically, Gwen and me. But the servants come in here to clean and I daresay Poddy and the other two women come snooping in here now and again, to see what I’m doing.’ He smiled grimly. ‘I just wish I could catch one of ’em at it!’

I had a quiet chat with Poddy that evening. He’d brought off some stroke of business that had put him in what was, for him, an excellent frame of mind. For once he didn’t try to borrow from me, or attempt to get me to buy a piece of the junk he had accumulated.

I listened patiently to his account of how he had managed to boost the price, thus making the deal doubly profitable, but then he must have realised he was making an unfavourable impression, for he hastily went on :

‘Not that I’d do such a thing to you or any other *personal* friend, you understand. Good Lord, no! I sting these chumps, then let my pals have the benefit. I mean, if I can pass a favour on to a chum, well . . . !’

It took about ten minutes to steer him round to the subject of insurance. He didn’t seem anxious to talk about it, but I got him to admit that he acted as an insurance agent on the side, as it were. ‘I don’t do much in it,’ he confided, and then couldn’t resist the temptation to show me how smart he was, for he told me how he insured his own stuff at a discount.

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‘I get the commission, see,’ he explained. ‘And a special rate.’

‘Good for you.’

The words seemed to cheer him a little. ‘Insurance is a good thing,’ he told me seriously. ‘I wouldn’t be without it.’

‘You got your cousin to take out a life policy?’

‘Who told you that?’ He appeared to be genuinely surprised.

‘Well, didn’t you?’

‘As a matter of fact, no. It was Gwen. She talked to me, asked me to have a word with him.’

Once more : G W E N.

The little man wasn’t looking quite so happy now. Maybe he realised he’d talked a bit too much? He was wiping his damp hands on a slightly grubby handkerchief as he peered up at me. ‘Why are you asking me all these things?’

‘I’m interested in insurance.’

‘Then talk to me in business hours.’ He turned and moved as though to leave me but I wasn’t letting him go so easily.

‘Why didn’t you try to insure Mrs. Bray’s rubies?’

‘And what the hell does that mean?’

I shrugged. ‘Only that if you’d seen the bracelet for appraisal purposes, Gwen wouldn’t have gone on believing she was to inherit something valuable.’

Poddy was eager to explain. ‘I tried to get the old lady to insure the thing. Honest! I tried a dozen times. I asked her what would happen if the house was

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burgled . . . you know the sort of thing. But she was stubborn. Dead stubborn. Wouldn't listen.' He was becoming slightly hysterical, then he wrenched away and almost ran out of the room.

There was a muffled cry, then I heard someone running away. Seconds later, Maureen Chase peered through the open doorway. 'Poddy nearly knocked me over,' she stated. 'What have you been doing to him?'

'Nothing.'

'Is that why he ran off in that fashion?'

'I wouldn't know.'

She didn't believe me, of course. Her over-exposed, over-developed bosom heaved in indignation as she glared at me, her faded blonde hair hanging untidily and giving her a slightly drunken appearance. I was quite sure she regarded me as a monster who was capable of torture – the sort of tyrant who would ill-treat men half his size.

'Miss Chase,' I said. 'Did you ever see Mrs. Bray's ruby bracelet?'

The question put her off her stride. 'What?'

'I asked if you ever saw the ruby bracelet?'

'I saw those bits of coloured glass, if that's what you mean.' Then she peered at me through narrowed lids. 'Just what are you getting at, Mr. Carver?'

I wasn't quite sure myself, but I had to make some answer. 'I wondered if Gwen had hidden it somewhere and forgotten it? . . . You know what her memory's like.'

'Are you mad?' She was getting angry now, the

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large expanse of chest going turkey-red and the colour washing up her thick neck into her face. 'There's nothing wrong with Gwen's memory.' She swallowed in an effort to keep calm. 'Just what are you trying to say?'

What I was trying to say was that Gwen had in fact inherited the bracelet, producing the bits of coloured glass to show other people, and spreading the story that the real bracelet didn't exist. It was a feeble theory, but the only one I could think of at that moment. Maureen glared at me for another moment then snorted – there's no other word for it – before wheeling and marching off. I didn't seem to be very effective.

It was then, at the very moment that I was thinking of chucking the whole thing up because I was useless, that I had my bright idea. I don't claim any credit for it; anyone else would probably have thought of it days before. But as I mentally examined it now I reckoned it was worth-while looking into, despite the fact that it didn't appear to have any direct bearing on Foster's conviction that he was being poisoned.

But now I could see that there were two lines of investigation in connection with the bracelet. One possibility was that Mrs. Bray no longer owned the rubies when she came to live at her son-in-law's residence. In that case there was nothing to investigate. But the other possibility was that she *had* brought the piece of jewellery with her – and that someone had stolen it.

Poddy?

He was the logical suspect; he knew about precious stones. And he *might* have seen the bracelet. Suppose, for instance, he – or Belinda, or both of them – suppose the bracelet had been seen by one or the other of them? And that they'd pinched it, putting the bits of glass in its place?

Would they do such a thing? Certainly they weren't above doing a bit of snooping, but this was a very different matter. It would be very risky. If the sick woman discovered the theft they'd be for it. There was an answer to that but before I dare contemplate it, I'd need to have a chat with Foster.

He was, as usual, in his study, his desk littered with books of crossword puzzles.

'My one form of relaxation,' he explained. 'But you look as though you are on to something.'

'Maybe. Foster, how much of an invalid was Gwen's mother?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, was she bed-ridden?'

'She spent twenty-three hours out of every twenty-four, in bed.'

'But she could get up by herself?'

'Gwen said she could just about manage it.'

'So Mrs. Bray would be about her room?'

'She could get to the bathroom, if that's what you mean. Apart from there she never went anywhere else.'

So Mrs. Bray was capable of getting out of bed. In



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which case she might have been able to check the rubies every day.

'Was she very secretive?'

'Better ask Gwen. She seemed all right to me.'

'Was her mind clouded?'

'Only at the very end.'

'Maureen Chase says Mrs. Bray was potty.'

He looked at me sardonically. 'Haven't you found out about Maureen yet?'

'What should I have found out?'

Foster sighed. 'You're rather naïve, Carver. She's in love with Gwen.'

He was too damned right, *I was* naïve. The explanation of her behaviour had been plain to see – for those not too blind. I was just about to make an objection when he forestalled me. 'It's all right, man. She doesn't *bother* Gwen. If she tried anything, I'd have her out of the house in five minutes.'

Once again I suffered the disconcerting impression that he could read my thoughts, for he'd answered my objection before I'd uttered it.

'Does your wife know?'

'I doubt it.' He looked down at the book of cross-words he'd been working on and it was pretty clear he was anxious to get back to his puzzle. 'Anything else about Mrs. Bray that you want to know?'

'Not for the moment, thanks.'

'Then if you'll excuse me . . .?'

## THE SOURCE OF DEATH

When, later, I watched Maureen and Gwen I wondered how I could have been so stupid as not to have noticed the older woman's regard for her hostess. Although I claim I see more than most people, Midge has always said I go round with one eye closed and the other behind a darkened piece of glass. In this instance she was dead right and I felt a sudden rush of affection for the darling girl. I was missing her badly.

But to business.

Not too much earlier I hadn't had a real suspect. But within the space of the last few hours I'd come up with two. Poddy . . . and Maureen. 3

## NINE

THE INQUEST on Griffiths was held next morning, but beyond formal identification of the dead man nothing was done, the proceedings being adjourned. Inspector Warren was there, smooth as ever and looking as though he knew all the answers. He wished me the time of day most politely but didn't seem inclined to linger.

Not that I was keen to hang around, I wanted to get back to Town for a chat with Midge.

I didn't have time to put my key in the door before it was opened by the dear girl. She flung her arms round my neck and gave me the kind of welcome I appreciated, but which is not the usual sort of greeting from a secretary to her boss. Not that I'm so sure that I *am* her boss; I've more than a sneaking suspicion that I'm ruled by her. Anyway, whichever it is, I'm not complaining.

Later, after we'd dealt with the correspondence, I told her what had been happening and of my suspicions concerning Poddy.

'You really believe that he poisoned Mrs. Bray

## THE SOURCE OF DEATH

to keep her from finding out about the rubies?’

‘It’s a possibility.’

‘You’ll be careful, sweetheart, won’t you?’

‘He doesn’t even suspect what I’m there for, Midge. He thinks I’m working on a play with Foster.’

‘All the same . . . !’

‘I’ll be careful. I promise . . . Now. *If* Poddy stole the bracelet, I’m pretty sure he’d get rid of it at once. They never seem to have enough money, from what I can gather.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I’m going to try tracing that bracelet.’

‘Is that possible?’

‘If we have a bit of luck. You see, it’s a valuable piece of jewellery, so there wouldn’t be many places he could take it. I doubt if there’d be more than two dozen shops in London where they’d buy such a thing without having to put the sale through another, larger, dealer.’

She listened intently as I developed my plan. It was quite simple, really. I intended to get her to make the round of the leading jewellers, making enquiries about the bracelet.

‘Tell them it’s part of a matching set of necklace and ear-rings,’ I said. ‘You’ll be acting on behalf of a buyer who has the other pieces, but who wants to trace the bracelet in order to complete the set.’

‘Won’t they want a description of the stones?’

‘They’re bound to ask, but it doesn’t matter. All

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you're doing, you say, is making preliminary enquiries. I'd do it myself but they might get suspicious and refuse to give any information. But with you . . . !'

'Flatterer!'

But she saw that what I said was reasonable and then I had some difficulty from stopping her rushing out to start her search straight away. 'We'll have a bite of food first,' I said. 'And while you're getting that ready, I'll list the nearest and the biggest jewellers.'

There was the chance, assuming Poddy had taken the stones, that he'd sold them elsewhere, but I was very much inclined to think he'd dispose of them in London, where there were more prospective buyers. But Midge was looking at me speculatively. 'Is that clear?'

'Perfectly, my sweet.'

'Then what are you waiting for?'

'I was wondering.'

'Wondering what?'

She smiled gently. 'Well, I mean. Calling in at all those jewellers. Isn't it the perfect opportunity to buy an engagement ring?'

'No!'

'You said you would, some day.'

'I said I *might*!'

'Just a teensy, weensy one?'

Certainly I was going to marry the girl: but not yet. This was the sort of discussion that came up fairly often and I was aware that one of these days

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I'd give way. But not this time. It wasn't any good telling her I couldn't afford to buy her a ring – she knew the state of my bank balance better than I did, for she did most of the work on my accounts. Besides, given a bit of encouragement she'd have bought and paid for the ring herself, until such time as she could persuade me to get her a more expensive one.

‘Be off with you!’

She kissed me lightly on the nose. ‘Very well, darling. But don't think you're going to get away from me, because you're not.’

Dear Midge! I couldn't bear to think of doing without her. Five minutes in her company had restored me.

When I went back to Foster's home I missed her very much. The atmosphere of the house was all wrong; I could almost *feel* the tension. Something was different and it didn't take long to find out what it was. Jackley, the butler, was ill and his wife was nursing him. Gwen had had to take over.

I found her in the kitchen, preparing vegetables. ‘I'm sorry about Jackley,’ I said. ‘And I think I'd better go back to London for the time being. That'll be one fewer for you to cope with.’

‘It's not really any more trouble to cook for half a dozen than it is for five.’ She smiled, and when she did that she looked wistfully beautiful. ‘Besides, Leslie wants you to stay and I like looking after people.’

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I had a sudden vision of her, working at preparing a meal for her family. Not in this huge, expensively equipped kitchen, but in a cosier place, smaller and more intimate. Somehow at that moment she seemed the sort of girl who would have been happiest in a small, suburban home. Yet she'd been born in a family where there was, at least for her earlier years, considerable wealth.

Perhaps I was feeling sentimental after being with Midge, but when I left Gwen and went upstairs I was still thinking that possibly she was in the wrong environment.

I went into the bathroom and considered whether I should have a soak. I'd decided to, then noticed there were no towels. They weren't in the bedroom either and I went down again to ask where they were kept. Presumably Jackley should have replaced them, but had been taken ill.

'Can you tell me where I find the towels?'

Gwen looked up, frowning. 'They're in your room.'

'No. The used ones have been taken—'

'But I put them there myself!'

Her face was looking suddenly older. She wiped her hands, then hurried out of the kitchen. I trailed behind her and watched her, when she got into my bathroom, stare vacantly at the empty towel rail. After a few seconds she swung round to face me.

'I — I'll get you some towels,' she said, her voice unsteady. I was surprised at the effect I'd produced,

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although it wasn't the first time I'd caught her out in her forgetfulness. But the real shock came later, when I was ready to go to bed.

I turned down the sheet and climbed in – then got straight out again, for something was wrong. It wasn't until I turned back the under sheet that I found what it was that had made it uncomfortable to lie down. A pair of clean towels had been placed on the mattress beneath the bottom sheet.

Gwen's absent-mindedness appeared to be developing.

Next morning I met Mrs. Jackley for the first time. She was about fifty-five, stout and with grey hair parted down the centre and rolled into plaits. Her face was hard, the lips turning downwards at the corners of her mouth and somehow giving her the expression of a grim wardress. If she found any joy in life she managed to keep the fact concealed.

She was passing through the entrance hall when I came across her and she gave me a curt greeting and would have passed straight on if I hadn't stopped her. 'How is Jackley this morning?'

'He'll be back on duty by tomorrow, sir.'

'I'm pleased to hear it.'

But she didn't share my pleasure. After a moment's hesitation, waiting to see if I had anything else to say, she stumped off, looking as though she was going to fry all the chips she had on her shoulder. It was all



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the more surprising, therefore, when she waylaid me about an hour later when I was waiting for Midge to put through the call she'd promised.

'Could – could I have a word with you, sir?'

'Certainly.'

Mrs. Jackley looked round uneasily, as though she expected to be overheard. 'I wonder if you'd mind coming through to the kitchen, sir?'

'I'm waiting for a telephone call.'

'I'll switch it through, sir, if you like.'

'Very well.'

I followed her, marvelling at the way in which she controlled her movements. She was tall and very much over-weight, but she moved like a ballet dancer, despite the fact that she was not too happy, afraid that she might be seen, I supposed.

We reached the kitchen and she settled me in a chair at the table, offered me some coffee and then pottered around, doing her best to postpone the moment when she'd have to tell me why she'd asked me into her domain.

'Well, Mrs. Jackley?'

She sat down opposite me and leaned forward on her folded arms. 'I've read every book you've written, Mr. Carver.'

So far as I was concerned, it was a complete surprise. I've had a good number of fans – complete strangers – either write to me or speak to me in the street. But I'd never had one stare with such deadly seriousness as she did.

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'I hope you've enjoyed them.'

'Yes, I have. And it's because of that I've worked up the courage to speak to you, sir. You see, there's no one else I can talk to.'

'But what about your husband?'

'He's still too drunk to speak to anyone.' The words were spoken flatly, without any emphasis, and I realised that the situation was too common, too often repeated for her to feel emotional about it.

'I'm sorry.'

'You needn't be, sir. I'm used to it.' Her face was dead-pan but her hands betrayed that she was suffering embarrassment. People suffering strain can school their features, even their eyes, but not their hands. Maybe the hands are far enough away from the brain to have some separate life?

'But in any case I couldn't speak to Jackley about it, sir. Nor to anyone else in the house. I've known them too long.'

What was going on behind that blank façade that was her face? 'You have my word that anything you say to me will be kept secret . . . unless there's something radically wrong, of course.' I didn't say that if she was going to confess to murder I'd have to tell the police, but for one wild moment I thought she was going to admit to being guilty.

'I want to know if Jackley and me have been cut out of the master's will.'

It was hardly what I'd expected. 'I can't possibly tell you that,' I objected.

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‘The master was saying something the other day about changing his will. What I want to know, sir, is if he’s cut Jackley and me out?’ Now the tension was beginning to show in her face; the long upper lip was beaded with sweat. After a minute’s silence she gave a moaning sob.

‘Look sir, it isn’t that I’m being impertinent,’ she said desperately. ‘The truth of the matter is that Jackley and me don’t get paid much – we’ve not had a raise in fifteen years.’

The story she told me wasn’t too unusual. The two of them had been kept on by Foster when he bought the house. He’d been a bachelor and they had imagined themselves to be secure for life, knowing that Foster’s health was rather frail and that he had put them down in his will for a large inheritance.

As she talked on it was easy enough to picture what a shock it had been when he married. Indeed, Mrs. Jackley was frank enough to admit how upset she and her husband had been, to find their authority usurped – and the amount they were to inherit, cut.

‘What I’m getting at, sir,’ she ended, ‘is if we’re still down in the will or not. If we are, then we shall stay on with Mr. Foster; but we were let down over the marriage and so, if we’re not in the will, now’s the time to find a new job, while we’re still not too old . . . The uncertainty’s driving Jackley to drink.’

Well, some of my fans have from time to time exhibited great faith in my ability to put things right

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for them, but this was the best example of all. Unless, of course, Mrs. Jackley's real motive was to find out if it was still worth-while to poison Foster? I mean, she wouldn't have been the first faithful servant to get rid of the master for the sake of an inheritance. •

'Couldn't you ask Mr. Foster direct?'

'It might displease him, sir.'

The implication was clear enough. Even if they were still down to inherit, such a question might make Foster alter the will. It was, I felt, a valid point. Human actions can be motivated by the oddest things. I stood up.

'I can't promise anything, Mrs. Jackley, but I'll see what I can do.'

It wasn't easy to get away from her expressions of gratitude but at last I managed to do so without being too rude. An author should never upset one of his fans. Lord knows, they're rare enough as it is. But I'd only just got as far as the hall when Midge's call came through and within seconds I'd temporarily forgotten the Jackleys' problems.

Midge was in good form; I could tell that almost before she spoke. 'You've got something?' I asked, after we'd exchanged greetings.

'I'll say I have! At the ninth place you gave me to call at I struck oil, in a manner of speaking.'

'And?'

'Well, I actually struck rubies. They'd bought a ruby bracelet that might – *might*, they said – be the one my client was searching for.'

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‘For heaven’s sake, Midge, get on with it!’ Her slow drawl was deliberate; she likes to tease me as much as I enjoy teasing her, the only difference being that she won’t admit to it.

‘All right, sweetheart, keep your scalp on!’ She paused, deliberately provocative, before she relented and the rest of her news was babbled out at top speed. It transpired that on a date about two months before Mrs. Bray’s death, a Bond Street jeweller had purchased a ruby bracelet from a Mr. Foster, for the price of ten thousand pounds.

‘Ten thousand! That’s a lot more than the price I was told, Midge.’

‘I know. But how long is it since the stones had been valued? Prices have gone up a lot, you know.’

She was right, of course. But three thousand pounds was a hell of a step-up. Still, I might be able to find out about the valuation. ‘I found out a bit more,’ she went on, and now she was sounding smug. ‘The bracelet consisted of fourteen stones, linked with platinum and with a platinum lock and safety catch.’

‘Excellent work, Miss Holmes.’

‘I thought you’d like it.’

‘I do. And I’ll see you are suitably rewarded when I get back.’

‘I’ll hold you to that,’ she said softly, before ringing off.

I spent an hour in my room, dealing with corres-

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pondence, before I could get down to deciding my next move. Midge hadn't been able to get a description of the man who had made the sale. His name had been given as Foster – but although it was almost certainly Poddy, there was an outside chance that it could have been Leslie.

When you are conducting an investigation you have to cover all eventualities. It would have been easy enough for *Leslie* to pinch the bracelet; he was short of cash. Not that I imagined for one moment that he had done such a thing, but there was another factor to take into consideration – Gwen might have taken the ruby bracelet, and got him to dispose of it.

That seemed quite a likelihood. That way she'd not be the prey of Poddy and Belinda, when the inheritance was taken over.

Fortunately I had another source of information – a writer whose main occupation is running an antiques shop in the King's Road, not far from my flat. I'd contacted him once or twice when I'd wanted details about old furniture, for one of my books.

I rang him up but unfortunately the phone was answered by his wife, Mavis. She's a charming woman, a good cook, an authority on pottery and German wines. But she likes to chatter and it was at least seven minutes before her flow of conversation dried sufficiently for me to make it clear that I wanted to speak to her husband, Charles.

'Why didn't you say so,' she said aggrievedly, 'instead of gossiping?'

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From experience I knew there was no use in saying anything more until I heard her husband's voice.

'Charles here, Philip. What service can I render you?'

'Ever heard of a chap called Foster – Poddy Foster?'

'Round little squirt, on the fringe of the second-hand trade?'

'That could describe him.'

'What do you want to know about him?' Charles is a repository of knowledge of everyone in the antiques trade.

'What do you know?'

The one thing he told me that was really of interest was that just over a year ago Poddy had been up to his hair-line in debt. But he'd apparently come into money and cleared his obligations, so that he was still in good standing.

'Did his debts amount to much?'

'I dunno, mate.' Charles' affected voice sounded as though he was bored, but this wasn't out of the ordinary. 'Must have been three or four thousand, at the least.'

'Maybe he made a good sale?'

'You kidding?'

'It's possible.'

'So it is, boy, so it is. But if he'd have made a big sale, everyone in the trade would have known about it. These things get round, you know. 'Specially in our

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– in my – racket. No, take it from me, if he'd made a killing, word would have spread.'

Yes. But not if it had been a real killing – not if Poddy had committed murder. .



## TEN

I HAD another chat with Foster, gradually bringing the conversation round to the late Mrs. Bray and her ruby bracelet. He seemed rather puzzled by my questions and finally asked me outright what I was aiming at. He went on : ' You've discovered something, haven't you?' There was a restrained eagerness in his manner and I judged he wouldn't be able to keep himself under control for much longer. He seemed to have aged since the first time I came to stay at his house – aged considerably.

' I don't think it's anything to do with what's troubling your mind,' I told him.

' Let me be the one to decide that.' The words were snapped out, as though from a schoolmaster to a particularly annoying pupil. He was staring at me as though my words were vital, and I was sorry I'd started to tell him. It would have been much better to tell Gwen and let her pass it on or not, as she chose. But it was too late for that.

' Gwen's mother did have a bracelet of rubies.'

Foster was wide-eyed, as though he couldn't believe he had heard correctly. ' Is – is that it, Carver? Is this your marvellous discovery?'

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He was on the verge of hysteria, control slipping away from him. This was something new and I didn't like it one iota. But I was committed, so I told him. The effect was remarkable; I might almost have thrown a bucket of cold water over him; he was completely sober now.

'You're certain of this?'

'It seems fairly sure,' I said cautiously. I was more interested in his changed mood than in anything else. I couldn't fathom the man at all.

'Poddy!' Foster shook his head, but there was a very faint smile at the corners of his mouth, as though he was more amused than anything. Yes, Foster really was a remarkable character. He sat, shaking his head in smiling disbelief at intervals for several minutes, until I could stand it no longer.

'What will you do?'

He looked at me, his face enigmatic now. '*I'm* not going to do anything, Carver, but I shall ask you to do me a favour.'

'Yes?'

'Tackle Poddy. See if you can get him to confess.'

'Isn't that a job for the police?'

'I told you, I have a very low opinion of the local force.'

'But this isn't petty theft, Foster.'

At that moment the telephone on his desk buzzed and he lifted the receiver, putting it down after a few seconds and staring across at me. 'Talk of the devil!'

Moments later Detective Inspector Warren was

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shown in by Gwen, who withdrew, leaving the three of us. Warren was at his most urbane, adjusting his trouser legs carefully as he sat down, so as not to crease them unduly.

‘I’d like to have a talk with you, Mr. Foster.’

‘By all means.’

‘A private talk.’

Foster smiled. ‘I have no secrets from Carver. We’re collaborating on a piece of work, you know.’

Warren made a graceful gesture with his hands. ‘Then if you have no objection to Mr. Carver’s presence, sir, I’m sure I have none.’ He paused. ‘But I must warn you, sir, it is a delicate subject.’

‘Really? Then you’d better tell us.’

‘Very well, sir, I will . . . It’s come to our attention that your wife – Mrs. Foster – and the late Mr. Griffiths were good friends.’

It was immediately obvious what Warren meant and I looked at Foster. He seemed to be unmoved. ‘Everyone in the house was friendly with Griffiths.’

‘I believe Mrs. Foster was an especially good friend of his, sir.’

‘Use plain English, man.’

Foster’s tone didn’t bother the detective at all, so far as I could see. ‘Very well, sir, if you insist . . . We have reason to believe that your wife and the deceased were lovers.’

There was a tense silence before Leslie spoke : ‘Have you said anything to her?’

‘Not as yet.’

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'Then I shouldn't waste your time.' Foster appeared to make a decision. 'Your information is correct. They did have an *affaire*.' It was difficult to grasp that he was talking about his wife; he might have been discussing an academic problem. 'But I'm afraid your information is also out of date. The whole thing was over years ago.'

I was sweating with embarrassment but neither of the other two men looked affected by the conversation. It had a nightmarish quality that distressed me, to hear Foster discussing his wife's infidelity.

Warren leaned forward slightly. 'May I ask how long you've known about this, sir? And how you came to find out?'

Now I could grasp what he was getting at. Who more likely as a suspect than the wronged husband? But surely he didn't really think that Leslie had done such a foul thing? But Foster was almost casual.

'I've know about it ever since it happened. Gwen – my wife – confessed to me. It's a very simple story, really. You see, Inspector, I'm a lot older than my wife. When we married the poor girl was unhappy. Her father had – but I won't talk about that part of it. Suffice to say that immediately after our marriage, she imagined she had made a great mistake. So, what more natural than that she should turn to the nearest attractive male about her own age?

'It was a short-lived business. She soon discovered that the *affaire* was the real mistake, and she told me about it.'

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God knows what it had cost him to tell that story in such a calm manner. He was proud as the devil, but I could see that Warren had lost some of his self-assurance. There was a hint of respect in his regard of the older man, and his voice was gentle when he spoke.

‘Thank you for telling me that, sir.’ He stood up, moving towards the door. ‘I shall forget what you’ve just said, Mr. Foster . . . Good day, gentlemen. I’ll find my way out.’

The door closed softly behind him and I found I couldn’t bring myself to look Foster in the face. There was a long silence, then he sighed. ‘Well, now you know.’

‘I’m like Warren, Foster. I’ve forgotten the whole episode.’

‘You’re very kind, but you don’t have to concern yourself with delicacy. I’ve lived with the knowledge a long time and it doesn’t bother me now. Show me the human being who doesn’t make mistakes, Carver. It behoves us all to show compassion.’

It was the type of pedantic speech he’d made the very first time I’d met him and somehow it made him a stranger to me. I stared at him, wondering how it was possible for a man to act as he had done a few moments earlier, in Warren’s presence.

‘You know the reason behind the Inspector’s visit? . . . He thought he’d got a clue to the slayer. He believed I’d just found out about Gwen – that I’d revenged myself on her lover.’

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He was right, of course. Whatever reaction Warren had hoped to get he certainly hadn't expected Foster's calm recital of the facts. The fact that he'd seen the playwright, and not Gwen, must almost certainly have meant that he'd suspected Foster of getting rid of a rival. Well, I had to admit to myself that it would have been a good enough motive – assuming Foster had just discovered the *affaire* and acted in sudden passion.

'Look, Foster, I'd like to ask one or two questions.'

'Fire them off.'

'It – they're about Griffiths.'

He was quite relaxed. 'Go ahead.'

'Did you know him very well?'

'I talked with him from time to time, but it was always about cars – the jobs I wanted done. That sort of thing.'

'Was he a ladies' man?' I thought he might resent the question, but he didn't.

'I've no idea. Why do you ask?'

'Someone else's husband . . . !' It was embarrassing – but only for me. He gave the suggestion consideration, then nodded.

'Yes, that's possible.'

I didn't mention the other possibility – that a jealous, discarded woman might have been the killer. Poison is a woman's weapon; not exclusively, of course, but in most cases. You've only got to check through the files of murder cases to know this. It didn't have to be a discarded woman, though. What about

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Maureen? She'd have her own peculiar motive. But then, Poddy might have had one. Suppose Gwen had found out that Poddy had stolen the bracelet and confided in Griffiths? Might he not have blackmailed the little man? And because of that, Poddy had got rid of him?

My head felt as though it was beginning to spin. I didn't for one moment think that such a theory was right; it was too involved. But the fact remained that almost every idea I had included Gwen. You just couldn't get away from her.

In the first place, if Mrs. Bray had been poisoned, no one had a better opportunity of killing her than her daughter. Gwen had fed her mother, prepared most of the food the invalid had eaten. And Gwen had believed she stood to inherit at least one piece of jewellery worth seven thousand pounds.

So far as Foster was concerned, well, if he *was* being poisoned, Gwen was in the best position to administer the stuff. She'd get the house and some money if he died. And she'd been Griffiths' mistress. There was no guarantee that she hadn't resumed the relationship, then found it a burden.

It all seemed preposterous. Trying to picture the sweet-faced, gentle Gwen as a wholesale poisoner wasn't easy. But the fact is that people's true nature isn't stamped on their features. If this was so, how much simpler life would be for the innocent.

I became aware that Foster was regarding me intently as though trying to read my mind. 'You've

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thought of something?' He was tense now, his lips a thin, tight line. •

'Not really.'

'Don't fool me, Carver! I know what you have going on inside your skull.'

'It wasn't anything.'

For a moment I thought he was going to explode, but he managed some sort of restraint. 'I'll tell you what you're thinking . . . You're convinced it's Gwen, aren't you!'

It was very difficult to keep myself from starting. 'Gwen?' My voice sounded feeble.

'That's right.' He got up and began to pace around the room, excited now. 'I don't blame you. That's what anyone would think – that she's the guilty person.'

'Foster, you're jumping to conclusions.' Even to my own ears there was no conviction in what I said.

'Be honest, man. You really think she's guilty, don't you!' When I didn't reply he went on: 'Right, I'm going to ask a great favour of you, Carver. I want you to prove that Gwen is innocent. I know she is, but you've got to make it clear for everyone to see.'

My immediate reaction was to run away – to have nothing more to do with the Foster household. But I hesitated, and in doing so I was lost. Leslie pleaded with me and I gave in. It was all against my better judgement but he was in such a state, almost in a



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frenzy, that I felt he would have a mental breakdown if I refused.

And so there it was. Now I wasn't to prove someone guilty; I was to confirm Gwen's innocence.

The moment I got clear of his study I swore at myself loud and long for being such an idiot as to allow myself to be so ridiculously involved. Indeed, if I'd been half-honest with Foster I'd have pointed out how hopelessly incompetent I was to deal with the job. The police were perfectly able to handle cases of this type, but Philip Carver wasn't. He was a goop.

In the first place, where did one start? Obviously the best thing to do was to try to prove someone else guilty, and when I'd thought of this I cheered up, for I realised that what I'd been asked to do was nothing new. It was, so to speak, looking at the problem from the other side. The basic fact was still that of finding the poisoner.

Very well, what about Poddy? I'd begin on him. .

## ELEVEN

PODDY was in good form at dinner that evening. He'd just brought off another highly profitable deal and was convinced that he was now sufficiently established as a dealer in antiques, that his fortune was made.

'It's just a question of expanding,' he told us all a dozen or more times. 'Getting the right premises – it's important to have the right address, you know.' His bald head gleamed with sweat and when he got up from table and moved off his steps were a trifle uncertain.

Previously I'd put up with him but now I sought him out to have a chat, and he seemed delighted to have me do so. I even agreed when he suggested we should go up to the billiards room for a game. The other four had made up a table for bridge and no one noticed when Poddy and I left them to their cards.

I'd expected Belinda to reflect Poddy's mood, but somehow she acted in reverse. The brighter he was, the quieter she became. Mind you, a subdued Belinda was about what in any other woman would be flam-boyancy.

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We played three games, a hundred points a time, and he beat me in all three. He played casually, using his cue without any apparent effort at aiming, but most of his strokes were very good indeed. Before we were half way through the second game I knew I wouldn't stand a chance against his slick skill and it occurred to me that at some time in his life he'd been a billiards hall shark.

'You're too damned good for me,' I told him after losing the third game.

'It's just that I'm on form.' Modesty in Poddy was something that didn't exist and I guessed he was trying to get me to play another game in an attempt to win back the money I'd lost – and more besides. But I wasn't falling for that ancient technique.

'How about coming up to my room, Poddy. I've got a bottle of rather special stuff.'

'Special?'

'Macallan-Glenlivet.'

I could tell he'd never heard of it and I regretted that I was going to waste the nectar on an uneducated palate. However, there was a job to be done. I led him upstairs, a lamb to the slaughter, I hoped.

During the course of the evening he'd put away quite a quantity of drink but I had to get through half the bottle of my private stock before I judged he was in a condition for me to start putting on the pressure. He was, for the fifth time, telling me what a smart fellow he was in business, when I agreed.

'I know you're pretty good at the game,' I told him.

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‘Chap I know was talking about you only the other day.’

It was the right tactic. He beamed. ‘I think I can shay – say – I think I can say I’m well known in the trade.’

‘I don’t doubt it. As a matter of fact, this chap said you were a very smart tradesman – said you must have made a very good deal just before he met you.’

Poddy was still happy. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Charles Hoskins.’

‘King’s Road.’

‘That’s right.’

‘I know ’em all, Carver.’

He was relaxed, happy, three parts drunk. It was time to strike. ‘Now I come to think of it, another bloke mentioned your name. Heward. Said he’d bought a ruby bracelet from you, just before the time Mrs. Bray died.’

It took about ten seconds for the thing to sink in. Then he sobered up faster than I’d have believed possible. But he wasn’t only sober – he was scared. ‘Wh-what did you say?’

‘I said you got hold of a ruby bracelet from somewhere – a bracelet that you sold for ten thousand pounds.’

He tried to get out of his chair but I shoved him down again and stood over him. ‘Who the hell are you?’ he whispered.

‘Don’t you know?’

‘You’re a detective, a bloody, stinking detective.’

He was shaking with fear, none of his bravado left.

‘If I were a detective, Poddy, you’d be on the way to the nick by now.’

He rallied a bit at the words and he looked as though he was trying to figure out a bluff, when there was a distraction. Someone knocked on the door and called out: ‘Poddy! Are you in there?’

It was Belinda’s voice. Before I could think what to do, she’d opened the door and peered in, her eyes opening wide as she took in the little tableau. She came into the room and closed the door slowly behind her. ‘What’s going on?’ She stared at him, then at me. ‘What’s the game?’

Poddy gave way to tears. ‘He knows, Billie, he knows.’ It was the first time I’d heard him call her by anything other than her full name.

She went to stand beside him and he clung to her, sobbing. ‘He knows.’

I’m not sure what reaction I’d expected, but she surprised me. She regarded me levelly over the top of his head, her face still for what seemed an age. Then, holding herself rigidly upright and still looking at me, she said softly: ‘I’m glad. It’s a relief.’

‘You know what he’s talking about, Belinda?’

‘The bracelet. What else?’ She shrugged. ‘It was my fault he took it.’

I was a bit nonplussed. She was holding him tight against her body, mothering him. Five minutes earlier I wouldn’t have believed it possible to witness such a sight, but it was clear enough that, in their own

peculiar way, they were in love with each other. The vagaries of human behaviour are a constant surprise.

‘Are you going to tell the police?’

‘It’s not my affair.’

‘But you’ll tell Leslie.’

‘What else can I do?’

‘No, of course not. You’ve got to tell him.’ She sighed, then noticed the half-empty bottle. ‘I think we could all do with a wee dram.’

You couldn’t help but admire the attempt she was making to keep some dignity. I poured the drinks and then she perched on the side of Poddy’s chair and began to talk. It must have been a tremendous relief to her to unburden herself. Poddy remained silent, his bald head bent so far forward that his chin touched his chest. From time to time she patted his arm, comforting him as she told her story.

The trouble had begun when Poddy tried to get Mrs. Bray to insure the bracelet. He’d heard about it but never saw it until one day when the sick woman had asked him to value it. She’d shown him the piece of jewellery, then regretted having done so and wouldn’t have any further dealing with him. But she had told him one thing – that her daughter, Gwen, had never seen the bracelet.

Belinda had started to brood over it. There was this valuable bracelet, hidden by a sick, failing woman. And there was Poddy, deeply in debt with the position worsening every day.

‘So that was it,’ Belinda droned on flatly. ‘I got

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Poddy to take it and substitute some fake thing. I know it was wrong but we didn't mean to rob Gwen. We were only going to use the capital to put Poddy's business on its feet. And then we were going to pay back every penny to Gwen.'

There was a small silence while I thought over what she had told me, then there was the sound of a sneeze. Someone was outside on the landing. But the door was so thick that they must have been very close for me to have heard the noise. It took me only a moment or two to run across to the door, but I was too late. The landing was empty.

I went back into the bedroom, wondering who had been eavesdropping, then dismissing it from my mind as I tried to sort out what was best to do concerning Poddy and his wife. He was calm now, resigned to whatever punishment he would have to face. But it seemed to me that the worst part of his suffering was over, now that his secret was out.

Belinda, too, was transformed. She stood there quietly, holding Poddy's head against her hip. 'What are you going to do?'

'I'll think it over.'

'You won't tell the police?'

'It isn't up to me to do that.'

'No, of course not.' She put a hand on Poddy's shoulder and shook him gently. 'Come on, darling, we'd better go.' They had reached the door when she turned to face me. 'Will you do us a favour?'

'That depends.'

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‘Give us thirty-six hours from now to tell Leslie. I’d rather we told him ourselves.’ She must have seen the doubt in my eyes. ‘Oh, we won’t run away, I promise you. But I – we – we’re going to need a bit of time to get adjusted.’

Two hours before I wouldn’t have trusted her but now she seemed such a different person that I decided in her favour. Maybe I was making a mistake but I’d rather have done that instead of condemning her out of hand.

‘I’ll give you until noon on the day after tomorrow.’

‘Thank you, Philip, you’ve been very generous.’ She sounded as though she was really grateful and I was still marvelling at her when she closed the door behind them.

It was only after she’d gone that I realised that I wasn’t necessarily the only one who knew the secret. The unknown listener who’d been outside my bedroom door might have heard it all. Whoever it was could have seen Belinda enter my room and come along to snoop, hoping to hear some juicy conversation. In that case they might have heard the whole thing.

But there was another possibility – that the unknown person had been passing by and heard only the drone of Belinda’s voice. And if this was so they may know nothing of the theft. Either way there was nothing I could do about it, so I went to bed.

Leslie Foster was at the table when I went down



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for breakfast. He looked in cheerful mood and in my state of mind at that moment I found his light-hearted manner somewhat repulsive. But when Jackley had served me and padded out of the room breathing heavily, the playwright made me feel a bit of a stinker.

‘I’m feeling happier this morning than I can remember feeling for ages. And it’s all due to you, Carver. You’re going to prove Gwen’s innocent.’

What the hell do you say to such a statement! I kept my mouth shut except to put in food. He didn’t seem to notice any lack of replies and went on talking inconsequentially. When Gwen joined us he continued without a break, changing to domestic subjects. There was a washer to be changed on one of the taps somewhere; some bedding plants to be seen to, some shopping to be done. He even discussed with her what she was going to buy on her trip.

It was the talk on shopping that gave me a clue as to what to do next. When we’d finished breakfast I went with Foster to his study, ostensibly to see if there was any mail for me among the letters that were placed every morning by Jackley on Foster’s desk.

There wasn’t anything for me, so presumably Midge was able to cope with anything that had come in, but I still stood there and Foster looked up enquiringly.

I asked him a straight question.

‘When Gwen goes shopping, does she buy weed-killer and such-like?’

‘Good Lord, no! Jackley handles all that.’

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It was all I wanted to know. I thanked him; told him I wouldn't be in for lunch, and left.

There was a warm, blustery wind and the sky was dotted with small banks of cloud as I went towards the greenhouses where Jackley spent part of his working day. I just wanted to assure myself that it would be a simple matter for anyone to help themselves to some of the weed-killer that was kept there.

Letting myself into the greenhouse presented no difficulty; the door was not locked. The shelf on which the weed-killer was kept was half way down the structure and I made my way towards it along the red-tiled gangway that ran the full length of the building. I love the warm, earthy smell of heated greenhouses and I was sniffing it in gratefully when I arrived at my target.

I hesitated for a moment. It seemed incongruous that the source of death to so many creatures should be in that place – the source of life to so many plants, flowers and vegetables. Then I picked up the tin and opened it. The contents were a brilliant green.

It seemed highly improbable that the stuff could be used to poison someone – the colour would make the powder's presence obvious.

'What you doin'?'

I spun round to see Jackley glaring at me. 'I – I was wondering if you find this any good?' He was dressed in gardening clothes and he didn't trust me one fraction of an inch.

'Course it's good. If it wasn't we wouldn't have it.'

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'I haven't seen it coloured like this before. It's usually a white powder.'

'The Master won't 'ave the white kind. Says it's dangerous.'

Jackley answered my other questions in surly fashion and I wondered if his manner was provoked by the knowledge that his wife had confided in me – which then reminded me that I hadn't done anything about solving the problem she had put to me. But first things first. What the butler-cum-gardener was saying wasn't of very great interest and I moved off, leaving him gazing after me. I could tell he reckoned me to be a very rum customer indeed, but he wasn't alone in thinking that.

Half a minute later I'd forgotten him; I had enough on my mind without bothering with him. I realised now why we hadn't seen too much of the detective, Warren. Undoubtedly he'd been smart enough to check on the poisons in Foster's home and greenhouse and it must have been immediately clear to him that the fatal dose could hardly have come from here.

All the chances were that the killer had obtained a supply of *white* arsenic, or cyanide, or whatever the poison was. It wasn't until that moment that I realised the police were being rather cagey. There'd been no mention of the actual poison used to kill Griffiths. Up to that moment I'd assumed, if I thought of it at all, that the fatal dose had been arsenic. I'd taken this for granted because of the tin of weed-killer I'd seen in

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the garage office. But that, of course, had long been empty before he died.

As I strolled back towards the Georgian house I was facing the truth. So far I'd found out a thief, and I'd seen one or two interesting traits of character, but as for the rest, I'd failed completely. What's more, I didn't know what to do next. I mean, think of it. How the hell do you prove that a person is innocent of murder, when the police have not made a charge, and all your enquiries have to be oblique?

But at least I could make it look as though I was doing something positive, and I quickened my step. Foster was available and I had a short chat with him during which I extracted from him the news that the Jackleys were still in the inheritance stakes, and that Gwen did nearly all her shopping in Durley, six miles away.

Durley was small and unattractive but it had a goodly selection of shops, including no fewer than three chemists. I went into the one that Foster had said Gwen patronised and asked to speak to the proprietor. He was elderly, tall and stooping, with a white dispensing coat that looked as though it had been used in a TV. advert to show the whitening power of a super detergent.

'What can I do for you, sir?' Head bent, he peered at me over the tops of his glasses, his eyes barely visible behind a hedge of eyebrows.

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'My name is Philip Carver. I'm an author.' I paused. 'I write detective novels.'

This time I waited for the reaction. Sometimes, but not nearly often enough, the person you are addressing has heard of you, in which case there's more than a chance you'll be told how bad such-and-such a book of yours was. And that the person to whom you are speaking could have done the thing much, much better, if only they'd had a few spare days in which to write the book.

The other reaction – which was the one I got this time – is that the man or woman draws back and watches you defensively, as though expecting to see you start to bark and foam at the mouth. 'I was wondering if you could give me a little information. I'm working on a crime book with a friend – Leslie Foster, actually.'

'Mr. Foster?'

'Yes.'

'The playwright?'

'Yes.'

'Lives at *Red Trees*?'

'Yes.'

He beamed. 'Mrs. Foster is often in here.' He obviously now considered that I was normal and worthy of help. 'How can I assist you, sir?'

I made a show of seriousness. 'We've come up against a matter of procedure,' I said solemnly. 'You *must* get the details right in a crime story, otherwise your readers all write in to the publisher, complain-

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ing of the mistakes . . . Well, now, we've got a little scene where someone goes out and buys some poison.'

'Yes?'

'We want to know the drill.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I - we - we want to know how one would set about it.'

He threw back his head and gave a neighing laugh, startling his assistant, a plain, plump girl who was peering at me over a stack of cosmetics and probably wondering what I was selling. But I wasn't interested in her, only in the man and his unexpected merriment. I couldn't see that what I'd said was funny.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I appear to have said something amusing . . .?'

'You mean to say you've come all the way from the house to ask about this?' He was still smiling, wiping the tears from his cheeks.

'Of course.'

He went off into a fresh paroxysm, then when he calmed down he regarded me sorrowfully. 'All you had to do, sir, was to ask Mrs. Foster.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Mrs. Foster knows the procedure, sir. She's bought several lots of poison. Why, she got the last lot only three or four days back.' He shuffled behind the counter and took a ledger from somewhere underneath it. He opened the pages and peered at them before looking up at me. 'That's right. Four days ago.'

He put the Poisons Register away and stood, chuck-

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ling. I tried to think of some way of getting him to show me the book, or of finding out what particular poison she'd purchased, but to ask was to invite suspicion on his part. After all, so far as he was concerned, I could now go back to Foster's place and find out from her all about the purchase – and the earlier ones as well.

I did the best I could. 'They always told me that authors aren't very bright,' I said, managing what I hoped would pass as a rueful smile. The old boy took it very well, escorting me to the door and opening it for me.

Before I went back to the house I parked the car in a lay-by and thought the whole matter over. The chemist's words had been a great shock; even now I could hardly believe that he'd told me the truth. But of course he must have done so. Then what in the name of heaven had made Gwen buy poison so openly?

It had been a sheer fluke that I'd gone to that particular shop. Actually I'd gone there in the certain belief that she'd *never* bought poison there. A calculating killer wouldn't have made such a stupid mistake, for that was one of the first places at which the police would have made enquiries about purchasers of poison. The old chemist hadn't said anything about police calling, so if they had done so they'd conducted their investigation with considerable discretion.

But what in the name of Beelzebub was I going

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to say to Foster? Of course, the purchases might have been innocent. Should I tackle Gwen first, before I mentioned anything to Foster? But suppose Gwen *wasn't* buying the poison to use in some blameless fashion. What then? Maybe I should throw up the game. Tell Inspector Warren everything I knew, then go back to Chelsea? Certainly that would make my life much more comfortable.

Unfortunately, it wouldn't do anything for Foster, and I was under a moral obligation to do what I could for him. Not that I could shield him if Gwen *was* guilty.

How wonderful it would have been to get the car moving and drive straight back to London, forgetting the nasty puzzle that surrounded the Foster household, putting everyone in *Red Trees* out of my mind and getting back to normality – and Midge.

Dear Midge!

The temptation was great, but I resisted it. I'm the sort of bloke who sticks to his word, once he's given it. I'm *not* claiming any credit for this, although I know it's a rare enough quality. No, I don't make any claims, for in my case it's just that I have to stick to my word – or suffer the pangs of conscience, which are worse than any discomfort that might be caused by keeping my pledge.

So, I'd best get it over.

I put the question straight to Foster when I got



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back. 'Have you ever asked Gwen to buy any poison?'

'Buy *poison*! Of course not. Are you crazy?' His eyes glittered. 'Whatever – oh, wait a minute!' He smiled in relief. 'I was forgetting. Yes, she gets it for me regularly.'

My mouth must have hung open for a moment. 'You tell me this *now*!'

He looked at me as though I wasn't quite complete inside my skull. 'But you've known all along . . . I showed you the greenhouses. Gwen buys whatever weed-killers and suchlike that we need.'

It was a good thing he'd explained it that way, for now I suddenly realised that I was in danger of making an utter fool of myself. Just because I'd seen only the green powder in the greenhouse, it didn't mean that there weren't other powders, bought for other weeds or pest destruction. Before I said anything more I'd better check with Jackley.

But Jackley was very positive that there were no other poisonous substances used in the greenhouses or the gardens.

And Leslie had lied about the poisons. Previously he'd told me that Jackley, not Gwen, bought all the poisons used at *Red Trees*.

## TWELVE

I SPENT most of the rest of that day in my bedroom, trying to forget fact by plotting two or three short stories that I'd promised to deliver by the end of the month. When I went down for dinner I found that Gwen was the only other person at table.

During the meal there were two questions that occupied my mind. One concerned Gwen. I must have looked at her a hundred times, trying to discover some clue from her expression. She made very little conversation; most of the time there was an expression of brooding sadness on her face, and from the dark, puffy circles under her eyes I guessed she had been losing a lot of sleep lately.

Did that have any sinister meaning?

I'd expected to see Poddy, but the little man was out. He'd telephoned saying that he wouldn't be back for dinner. Had he done a bunk? Or was it that he was simply postponing the evil moment as long as he could?

Whatever the meal was that Gwen and I ate, I can't recall a single item of it. All I remember is that when it was over I refused coffee, stretching and pretending to yawn before I asked to be excused.

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‘I think I’ll have an early night.’

She merely nodded and I was pretty sure that what I’d said had not registered; Gwen had something else on her mind. I wished her good night but she didn’t reply so I took myself off. I’d only been in my room a few seconds when there was a knock at the door.

Mrs. Jackley entered at my invitation and came forward, eager and apprehensive.

‘You’ll excuse me, sir, for bothering you, but I wondered . . .?’

Well, at least I was able to give *someone* some glad news. ‘You’re still down to inherit, Mrs. Jackley,’ I assured her. She received the news with great relief; called down a score of blessings on my head, and wished me the joy of a good night’s sleep and beautiful dreams.

When she had left me I wondered if I’d done the right thing. *If* Mrs. Bray had been murdered, and *if* Foster was being poisoned, the Jackleys *might* be the ones responsible. And letting them know about the will . . .?

‘Ah, hell!’

Suddenly I was tired. I undressed and prepared for bed, but once I got between the sheets I couldn’t sleep. Mrs. Jackley’s words might just as well have been a curse, for nothing I did made me drift off and I lay wide awake, staring into the darkness and thinking about Poddy. I couldn’t get the little man out of my mind.

Normally I’ve no use for crooks. They provide me

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with a living, but the only place they should be is between the covers of a book. I'm not the sort of person who feels that practically every criminal is a poor, dear chap who wouldn't have been a crook if only his mother had spoken kindly to him on all occasions, or whose father didn't present him with a motor-car when the little darling felt he wanted one. .

But I couldn't help feeling sorry for Poddy, and I had to include Belinda in this sentiment, even though she had driven him to theft. Oddly assorted though they were, the last time I'd seen them had convinced me that they could have been very happy together, but that the burden of guilt had made life almost intolerable. Still, however sorry I was for him, I couldn't excuse what he had done.

After an almost sleepless night I was glad when daylight came, I got out of bed, had a bath and tried to read. But the book wasn't very interesting so I gave up trying to wade through it and decided I'd sneak out and go for a long walk before breakfast. I still had Poddy very much on my mind as I walked quietly along the corridor towards the stairs and as I approached their room I stopped.

The interior walls of the house were very thick, and the doors were set back in the walls and were flush with the wall surface inside the bedroom. This meant that there was a sort of recess, almost to the depth of the wall. After a moment's hesitation I stepped into

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this recess outside their room and listened for a moment. There was no sound that I could make out; if they were awake and worrying about the ordeal to come, there was no audible evidence of it.

I moved away from the door and went on my way. Listening outside doors wasn't a habit of mine and I grinned ruefully as I remembered how I'd mentally castigated the unknown person who'd apparently tried to listen at my door. I consoled myself by the fact that I hadn't *expected* to hear anything; it seemed to make my action rather less odious.

Of course, the police wouldn't hold any objections to listening at doors, but theirs was a different case. They were doing a job, making a service for the community as a whole, whereas I was a guest in the house. At least, a sort of guest.

The walk was most enjoyable, and good medicine. The morning was still, a slight mist lying in the hollows, the grass too wet with dew for me to walk on it. I'd not gone far when I became aware that my footsteps were the only sound, except for the twittering of birds. Apart from their distant music I felt as though I was alone in the world and I could *hear* the silence.

By the time I got within sight of the house again, after a couple of hours' steady walking, I was more than ready for my breakfast. There'd just be time to go up to my room, shave and change, before Jackley started serving the meal. But as it turned out, I was going to have to wait until mid-morning before I had anything to eat.

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I'd only just opened the massive front door when I heard Foster's voice, full of surprise.

'Carver! Where the hell have you been?'

I could have resented the sharp tone, but when I looked up at the man, wearing pyjamas and dressing-gown, I stifled my protest. He looked dreadful, face strained, his eyes glittering with a feverish brilliancy.

'Are you all right, Foster?'

'Poddy's ill.' Foster was grey with fatigue.

'Is it serious?'

'I've just sent for the doctor.' There was an odd jerkiness about his speech that I didn't like. In my opinion he was almost on the verge of a fit.

'All right, then,' I said gently. 'You've done what you can. Promise me you'll go to your room and lie down until the doctor comes. I'll go and see what I can do for Poddy.'

But when I got up to Poddy's room, the little man was dead.

Even to my untrained eye it was obvious that he had been poisoned. •

## THIRTEEN

HE WAS LYING on the floor of the bathroom fully dressed, although his tie had been torn off and his shirt ripped open. He'd most probably done that himself, in his fight to live. There was a green-tinted glass – one of those they used in the bathrooms – on its side against the boxed-in bath, but otherwise the place was cleaner and more tidy than I'd have expected.

I backed out without touching anything, for it was clear that the police wouldn't want anyone interfering. I knew what had happened and I felt ghastly, for it was very obvious that Poddy had chosen not to face his cousin and confess. And I was the one morally responsible.

The whole miserable story was bound to come out, and I could just imagine how Warren would react. But for the moment I was more concerned with Belinda. Goodness knows what she must have been suffering. I stared at the bed. One of the pillows was undented, plumped up as though it hadn't been used. The other one, presumably where Belinda's head had reposed, was pulled right out of shape.

It was easy to reconstruct what had happened.

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Belinda had gone to bed. Poddy had gone into the bathroom and . . . ! That meant Belinda was either a very deep, sound sleeper, or she had been drunk or under the influence of sleeping pills. I doubted if it would have been possible for her to sleep through the din he must have made, unless she was drugged by something.

The most likely answer was that he had dosed her, so that she could not interfere with his plans. I looked round as someone came in. It was Gwen, haggard faced, her slim body wrapped in a floor-length house-coat.

‘Philip!’

‘I thought I’d wait here until the doctor or the police arrived.’

She barely listened to me. ‘I’ve got Belinda in my room. She wants some of her toilet water.’ She went over to the dressing-table, avoiding looking in the direction of the open bathroom door.

‘Is she all right?’

‘Terribly shocked, of course, but if I can get her to sleep . . . !’ She had taken something, a bottle, from one of the drawers of the dressing-table and had gone before I could think of anything else to say.

I spent the next few minutes prowling round the room, looking at the pictures that adorned the walls, the *objets d’art* that cluttered every flat surface. How many of them, I wondered, had been bought out of the money received from the sale of the rubies? But then I heard, faintly, the squeal of brakes and I knew



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that either the doctor or the police had arrived.

Actually they arrived together. At least, the old medico, panting with his exertions and looking ninety years of age in the morning light, led two uniformed patrol-car officers up to the bedroom. He probably knew the layout of the house as well as anyone, and as he came into the bedroom I just pointed to the bathroom and he went shuffling past, the policemen not two feet behind him.

He wasn't in there more than a minute. 'Where's the wife, Belinda?'

'In Gwen's room, I understand.'

Muttering to himself he went out and as he did so the two policemen emerged. I found myself ushered politely, but very firmly, out on to the landing. One of them shut the door and mounted guard; the other asked me to take him to the telephone.

I must say that Leslie Foster showed up very well under the strain. Immediately after Detective-Inspector Warren arrived and began quizzing the staff, Leslie himself went into the kitchen and cooked breakfast. Old Doctor Troodefor joined us and ate a remarkable meal for one of his age.

The situation upstairs was that both Belinda and Gwen were sleeping. The doctor had given them injections to make them rest, and although the action hadn't been popular with Warren, there was nothing he could do but accept the situation.

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It was a nuisance having the old man with us for there were a hundred questions I wanted to put to Foster, but I had to wait until the meal was over and Troodefor gone. Warren and the other officers were still upstairs and it occurred to me they were taking a long time. But I suppose that was only natural in the circumstances. There'd already been one murder by poisoning in the immediate neighbourhood; they'd go into this death very carefully. They might even think that Poddy had committed suicide because he was the murderer.

I poured myself another cup of coffee, but Foster refused another. 'I've had enough, thanks.'

I'd had a damned sight too much, I felt, and I didn't only mean of coffee. But if I didn't talk with him now, I'd not get an opportunity before Warren asked me for a statement. 'Did Poddy talk to you last night?'

'Talk?'

'Did he have anything to tell you?'

'What do you mean?'

'Look, Foster, there isn't time to fence. Answer me straight. Did Poddy see you at any time yesterday, to tell you something – something secret?'

'No.' He was gazing at me, staring me straight in the face without even a blink. 'What are you getting at?'

'Nothing. At least . . . No, I don't really know.'

'You're on to something!' His eyes began to glitter, in that peculiar way they did when he became excited

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or tense. 'Come on, Carver, out with it. I've a right to know.'

'It's nothing, really. Just that Poddy told me that he was going to see you – that he'd something important to tell you.'

Foster frowned. 'Well, he didn't. He did come to the study last night, but he didn't want to see me.'

'Oh?' Poor Poddy had probably funked it at the last moment – the pattern was building up just as I'd have expected.

'He said he wanted to have a word with Gwen.'

'Gwen?' There she was once more, her name popping up when you didn't expect it. Popping up, in fact, far too often for my peace of mind. 'Did he find her?'

'I couldn't say. I didn't know where she was. She frequently goes out for a walk after dinner. Sometimes she'll be away for hours.'

'Even in the winter?'

He looked at me, surprised. 'Of course. Gwen's not a city type, you know. She's a tough, country girl. But what is all this? You're getting at something and I can't make out what it is.'

Yes, I was getting at something, all right . . . Long walks in the winter. Where to? To see Griffiths, her ex-lover – if he *was* ex-? Suppose – just suppose – that Poddy *had* confessed, but to Gwen? Would she have been so outraged that she'd have got rid of Poddy? It seemed ludicrous, but after all she had bought some poison not so long back and she might have it hidden

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somewhere close at hand. If Leslie was being slowly poisoned the person responsible would need a stock of the lethal stuff.

But this was stupid. I was letting my fiction-writer's imagination lead me madly on. Poddy had killed himself; he hadn't been murdered.

'What is it, Carver?' Foster insisted.

'Honestly, it's nothing. Just that I'm tired, — and what's happened.'

I was keeping the playwright company in his study when Warren came to ask some questions. Even though the Inspector had probably rushed straight to *Red Trees* from his bed, he was as suave and well dressed as ever. I rose to go, but Foster insisted that I stay.

'You don't object to Mr. Carver's presence?' he asked Warren.

'Not if you don't, sir.'

'Then I'd prefer him to stay.'

Warren bowed smoothly and I sat down again, trying not to look pleased. Up to that moment I'd taken Warren to be an averagely good detective, but now I realised I'd underestimated his ability. He was good, there could be no doubt of that : very good. His questions were as carefully chosen, the words he used selected with as much precision as he showed in matching his articles of clothing.

Suddenly I knew I was in the presence of a man

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of power : a man of implacable purpose, one who would not be put aside from his objective, who would never give up, even after twenty years of striving. You meet such people now and again; their determination can be frightening to ordinary persons.

For the first ten minutes or so the questions were routine and ordinary and it wasn't until a little more time had passed that I understood where he was leading. It became plain enough to me – but not to Foster, who answered as best he could, without hesitation. But now, with Foster relaxed, the detective began the real questioning.

‘One thing, sir, while I think about it. I understand there is some poisonous weed-killer in your greenhouses?’

‘Good Lord, yes ! Don't you have it for your garden, Warren?’

I smiled briefly at the playwright's question. The Inspector looked as though the only garden he went into was the one at the Chelsea Flower Show, on members' day.

But Foster's tone was serious as he went in : ‘Good heavens ! You don't mean poor Poddy got the stuff from my greenhouses !’

‘No, sir, I don't mean that at all. We shan't know in any case, until later. But for the time being, I'm just checking on every possible source . . . Is there anything else, any other poisonous substance?’

‘Not that I know of. I mean, I wouldn't know if he'd bought some himself – or even if his wife had

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done so.' He looked across at me. 'You know anything about it, Carver?'

'Not a thing.'

'I'll be asking Mr. Carver later on, sir.' Warren's face and tone expressed only deference. 'For the time being . . . Now, you said that the weed-killer is the only poisonous substance in the household, so far as you know?'

'So far as I know.'

'Quite, sir. Now, just for the record. You haven't bought any poison yourself, lately?'

'Of course not.'

'Or authorised the purchase of any?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, sir, you haven't asked whoever does the shopping to buy any poison?'

'Why on earth should I do that?'

'Oh, several reasons, sir. Wasps' nests . . . you know.'

I knew that Foster was going to step straight into the trap set by the detective. And he did. Smack bang into the middle of it. 'I can assure you, Mr. Warren, that I've never authorised anyone in the house to buy poison, with the exception of my wife, of course. She does all the household shopping – well, almost all of it. And when Jackley says we need more weed-killer, Mrs. Foster gets it the next time she goes shopping.'

'But that is all?'

'Of course. Mark you, I can't answer for any of the others in the house.'

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I sat there feeling like death. Foster hadn't known about Gwen's purchases at the chemist's. Would it have been better if I'd told him what I'd found out? But what good would that have done? From the line of questioning it had been obvious for some time that the police already knew about Gwen's shopping.

Everything was horribly clear to me. Gwen was the guilty one – morally, at least. She must have frightened Poddy into suicide – or tricked him into drinking the poison. The dead man had tried to confess his crime to Leslie, had lost his nerve and asked for Gwen. He'd seen her . . . but, no! It didn't make sense. She'd never have risked going into his bedroom; Belinda might have been awake.

Then suppose Poddy had been to Gwen's room, had seen the poison and taken the quick way out of his troubles? But that was ridiculous; the poison wouldn't have been left in plain view. In any case, it wasn't the sort of thing one kept in one's bedroom. I could feel my brain beginning to spin, utterly unable to find a reasonable solution, and it was at that moment that the detective chose to turn his questioning on me.

It was lack of sleep, of course, that made me so confused. When I was a young man I could go without a night's sleep and be unaware that I'd missed it. Now, however, I find it rather different. Unless I get my full quota, I'm not much better than a half-baked fish the next day.

I don't know what sort of impression I made on

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Warren. You couldn't tell anything from his expression, which always seemed the same.

I'd expected a full session, but he was through with me in about a couple of minutes, so far as I could judge. The questions he asked didn't appear to have much bearing and he seemed more concerned to know when I'd be going back to London, than in finding out if I knew anything of significance.

Probably if I'd been more alert, more in charge of my faculties, I'd have told him all I knew. But, as he didn't ask, I kept my thoughts to myself. After all, I didn't have any real proof that Gwen was guilty. Let the police find out from others, I decided.

The Inspector didn't raise any objection to my returning to London. Indeed, I don't see how he could have done, but he told me that he would probably be up to see me to get a further statement.

'I'd like to see Chelsea,' he said, as though it would mean a visit to a sink of iniquity. I know that the place has a reputation for high – or low – life, but I ask you, was it, could it be worse than the place we were in at that moment? It might be a beautiful stretch of country, but murder and theft, plus goodness knows what else, had taken place there. Not to mention suicide.

Foster tried to get me to stay on but I was adamant about getting back to Town. But I did agree that I'd be back in time for the inquest and with that he had



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to be content. It was Saturday now, and the preliminary hearing was provisionally booked for the following Friday.

I phoned Midge and told her I'd be returning. 'You sound tired, sweetheart,' she said.

Dear Midge! She seems to know me better than I know myself, but then I learned the reason for her concern, 'What have you been doing?'

There was the edge of jealousy in her tone that I'd come to know – and laugh at. 'Poddy committed suicide,' I said. She was instantly contrite.

'I'm sorry, darling. Hurry home, but be careful how you drive.'

'Yes, ma'am!'

It had been a tonic, merely to hear her voice and the cold, wet morning that had developed was just the right weather to make me anticipate arriving home all the more.

Foster waved me goodbye from the shelter of the great, stone pillared porch, and as I drove out from the gates of *Red Trees*, I was already feeling less miserable. And by the time I'd left Griffiths' Garage behind I was fairly perky. I noticed that the garage was open for business and I wondered who was looking after the place, and what would happen to it. But then, on the main road, all I thought about was getting back safely.

I suppose I must be a home-loving creature, for it always seems to me that my car runs better when the bonnet is headed towards home. Certainly I always

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enjoy the return journey more than the outward one, no matter what the circumstances. And on this occasion I was singing to myself before I'd gone three miles.

It's one of the sad facts of my life that although I have a very fine, bass voice, no one seems to appreciate my singing. Indeed, in more than one instance Midge has objected strongly, raising her own voice in retaliation. This always works, for I stop singing immediately in order to get her to do likewise. Even though I love the girl; despite the fact that we're going to be married some day and I'm quite happy in the contemplation of spending the rest of my life with her – despite all this, I have to admit that Midge's singing voice is a cross between the croaking of a bull-frog with croup, and a tom-cat in the agonies of courtship.

When I got home she was waiting, full of warm, loving sympathy and I allowed myself to be cosseted. I use that word advisedly, for it originally was applied to an orphan lamb that was house-reared. I might almost have been such a creature, the way I was tended, and for at least an hour I wallowed in the pleasure. But then I was ready to tell her the whole story.

As I recounted it I was more and more aware of how everything led to Gwen, and of course Midge realised it as well, for when I'd finished she said :

‘Do you believe she's guilty?’

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There was a strange inflection in her voice and I looked down at where she was seated on the floor, head against my knee.

• ‘What makes you ask that?’

‘Oh, I was thinking.’

The airy tone she used made me want to reach down and shake her but I’d learned long ago to pay very careful attention indeed to any comment Midge made. Her singing voice may be off-key, but there is absolutely nothing wrong with her brain.

‘Thinking of what?’

‘Maureen.’

‘Go on.’

‘Well, the way you’d told me the story, certainly Gwen might be ridding herself of persons who had become an encumbrance. Or, in Poddy’s case, of someone who had done her harm – stolen something that should rightly have been hers.’

Midge wasn’t really talking to me at that moment, she was satisfying herself that she’d got the events sorted out correctly, recounting them aloud to herself. ‘And Gwen might be trying to get rid of her husband, who no longer makes a living. And if she *was* doing this she’d do it slowly, carefully, so as not to draw attention to the fact that he was being poisoned. His death would have to look as though it came as the result of natural causes . . . *the way Mrs. Bray’s death did.*’

She was quiet for such a long time that I interrupted her thoughts.

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‘I’m with you, as far as you’ve gone, but where does Maureen come into it?’

Midge turned to regard me, her clear grey eyes probing. ‘When a woman loves a man, Philip, she can be driven to almost any lengths to protect him,’ she said slowly. ‘If you were in a jam, or you were being threatened, I’d do anything to save you. I’d kill ten, a hundred people rather than see you harmed.’

It was the very quietness of her tone that made the words so impressive. Not for the first time I was reminded of the savage that is in most of us, not visible but under a very thin veneer of civilisation. I knew that Midge was speaking the truth, and I knew that I reflected those emotions she’d just expressed.

‘So?’

‘Well, if these emotions are roused when there is a normal relationship – or at least, what passes as a normal relationship between man and woman – how much stronger are they likely to be if the relationship isn’t accepted as being normal. If Maureen *loves* Gwen – you know what I mean – she could be the one getting rid of people who took Gwen’s affection away from her . . . the mother, the lover . . . or someone who hurt her, such as a person who stole Gwen’s belongings . . .’

‘Or Gwen’s husband,’ I added softly.

‘Precisely.’

Only a fool of monumental proportions could have failed to see it earlier. I’d never even considered that Gwen might have made purchases for anyone other

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than herself and Leslie – personal purchases, that is. But Maureen could so easily have asked Gwen to buy the stuff for her. I could even imagine how she'd do it.

'If you wouldn't mind, Gwen darling,' I could almost hear her saying. 'But it's so much easier for you. I mean, you're respectable, the wife of a prominent, famous man, whereas I don't even have a permanent home . . .' Something of that sort.

I told Midge what I'd thought. 'I admit your idea's made me uncertain,' I said. 'But there's something else. What if both Gwen *and* Maureen are guilty?' It didn't appear probable, but was it any more unlikely than that one of them should be the killer?

Yawning, I stretched. 'Oh to hell with 'em! Let's forget it. Leave it to Inspector Warren. He's smart enough to find out the facts, if there are any sinister ones to be uncovered. Let's leave the whole, miserable business. When he comes here I can tell him what I suspect, then leave it to him.'

Like so many resolutions, this one was broken within a very short space of time. Midge and I were enjoying a cup of tea in front of the fire – the day had become colder and even more wet – when the phone rang.

It was Foster.

What is more, it was a Foster who sounded almost hysterical. He wanted me to go back to *Red Trees* immediately; he believed he'd found out something of great significance.

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'I'm sorry, Foster,' I said, glancing at the window where the rain was being whipped against it by the wind. 'I don't –'

'But this is terribly important.'

'Then why not tell Warren about it?'

'No.' He began to plead; he was getting worked up. 'Listen, if you'll come down you won't need to stay. I – I just want you to do something for me – collect something.'

'Collect what?'

But he wouldn't tell me over the telephone. From the sound of his voice he was edging towards hysteria. 'Look, it's a matter of life and death. I don't know what to do, Carver. I'm relying on you to help me . . . Please.'

Sighing, I gave in. 'But only on the understanding I don't stay longer than to hear what you have to say and to collect whatever it is you want me to take.' He agreed, and I replaced the receiver. Midge was looking at me, shaking her head in reproach.

'I'm going to come with you,' she announced, expecting me to argue. But I was too pleased to have her in my presence to raise any objection. If I had to go to *Red Trees* and back, how much nicer to have Midge with me.

When we got there we couldn't see any evidence of police activity; if any detective was there he kept well out of sight. But Foster was waiting for us – or

rather, for me. He was jumpy, under greater strain than I'd ever seen in him, and as he led the way from the entrance to his study I got the curious impression that he was not walking under his own volition but that his limbs and body were being jerked along by invisible wires.

He took me right through to his study without our seeing anyone. I hadn't told him about Midge, for she hadn't been keen to enter the house, preferring to wait in the car for me. It was warm and snug enough there, for we'd had the heater on for most of the journey, and as I didn't intend to be more than a few minutes I was happy enough to leave her there.

The moment I got into the study I asked Foster what had made him drag me down there again. I was fairly blunt, for merely entering the place again had made me feel depressed. There was something wrong; it was in the very atmosphere.

'I promised I wouldn't keep you, Carver,' he said, 'but I must give you an explanation.' He peered round, his manner furtive, as though he was afraid of being overheard.

'The fact is, I think I've found out how I'm being poisoned.'

## FOURTEEN

F O S T E R was watching me closely, his eyes alert for even the smallest reaction. After a few moments of strained silence, he hurried over to the corner cupboard where he kept his first aid kit and his various medications. Seconds later he went back to the desk and banged down a tin he had taken from the cupboard. I recognised the tin; it contained the anti-acid powder with which he dosed himself.

‘There! That’s it.’

I’d thought about the contents of these tins more than once, wondering if he wasn’t upsetting his stomach instead of relieving his pain with the stuff. But until that moment I hadn’t thought of the anti-acid powder being used to conceal the presence of poison. It was the sort of idea that gave me the shudders.

‘You believe the poison’s in there?’

‘Yes.’

‘What makes you think that?’

He was calm as he gave me his reason. All yesterday he had felt fit; no pain, no discomfort. But after the upset caused by the discovery of Poddy’s death he, Leslie, had only had a scratch meal – cooked by him-



• THE SOURCE OF DEATH

self – and had then had a touch of indigestion.

‘Nothing much, you know. Just a bit of discomfort. But I came in here and took some of that powder. And within fifteen minutes I was dreadfully sick.’ He paused. ‘Well, when I got better, I telephoned you.’

I stared at the innocent-seeming tin, wondering why it hadn’t occurred to me before that the poison might have been hidden inside its contents. ‘Does it look all right?’

‘See for yourself.’

I opened the tin and examined the white powder that half-filled it, shaking the tin from side to side so that the contents were spread out as much as possible. But even though I held the tin under his desk lamp there was no trace of green specks, such as I’d more or less expected to see.

‘What are you going to do?’ I asked him.

‘I want you to have that analysed.’

It took me by surprise. ‘Why me? The police are better equipped. I can’t do an analysis myself.’

‘But you know someone who can?’

‘No.’

For a moment he was stumped, then found the answer. ‘But you can find someone who could? I mean, there must be lots of people in London who could do that?’

‘Isn’t there anyone near here?’

He was very firm. ‘Look, Carver. I *may* be wrong. I’m very well known in this area. What do you think would happen if I asked someone to examine this

powder to see if there was arsenic or something in it?’

‘Why do you say “arsenic”?’

The playwright regarded me momentarily as though I was a child. ‘The symptoms, of course. What else?’ He made a gesture of impatience. ‘Will you do as I ask?’

There was something about his manner that wasn’t quite right. Oh, he was under stress, of course, but it was more than that. And then I realised what it probably was. *He suspected Gwen!* And he was hoping desperately that I’d prove his suspicions to be unfounded. He didn’t dare to put them to the test himself; someone else had to do it for him.

‘All right, Foster, I’ll do as you ask.’

I got the impression that he was tremendously relieved but trying not to show it. That he’d have loved to raise his arms wildly above his head and yell with joyous triumph. Instead, from his desk he took string and brown paper and made a package of the tin.

‘You’ll see to it straight away?’

‘I shan’t be able to do anything before Monday morning.’ From the expression on his face it was clear that he’d forgotten tomorrow was Sunday, but he covered up his disappointment. ‘Anything fresh about Poddy?’ I asked.

‘No.’ He hesitated. ‘He was here nearly all the afternoon, mostly questioning the Jackleys.’ Again he paused. ‘You’ll let me know the result as soon as you can?’

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‘Of course. I said I would.’ It was all getting on my nerves. I was becoming conscious of my lack of sleep the previous night and I was keen to get away. Foster didn’t make any attempt to delay me, although I’d been certain he would, and as I got into the car I was grateful to him in a way, for letting me go.

Five miles from the house I stopped the car and let Midge take over the driving. I was suddenly too tired to go on and I settled myself down in the front passenger seat to have a short zizz. It was a filthy night, the rain hosing down, the wind gusting. Inside the car we were cosy enough, but not many other travellers had ventured out into such weather. In fact, there was only one other car in sight for the next ten miles, and that was following us, also headed for London.

But that it really *was* following us was something I didn’t realise until I woke a few minutes later. Midge was giving quite a lot of attention to the rear-view mirror and it was she who brought my attention to the car behind us.

‘I didn’t say anything at the time because it may just have been coincidence,’ she said. ‘But when we stopped, it stopped. And when I started up, it came after us again.’

There was just a chance that there was nothing to it. You’ll often find a car follow close behind you for miles and miles, especially at night. It seems that some people can’t stand being alone, they have to stay as close to other human beings as they can; separate

them from other human beings and they are lost, frightened.

But this wasn't just a case of someone following for the sake of company. We were well into London now and even when Midge came to a halt outside my house, the other car was still with us. But it didn't stop; whoever was driving kept on and a moment later the car was out of sight. It had been too dark to see who was driving.

'What do you make of that?' Myra demanded.

'Probably someone who wanted my autograph, then his courage failed.'

'Pooh!'

It was all very well making light of it, but I'd got a nasty suspicion in the back of my mind as to the reason for our being followed. My guess was that it was the killer, anxious to get the tin of powder back. But once I got inside the house I realised I'd been a bit melodramatic. Even if the killer got back the tin, how could that possibly be of benefit to him – or her?

All the same, when I'd taken Midge home and got back to my place, I made very sure that every door and all the windows were securely locked.

Not that I lost any sleep; I was unconscious about two seconds after I put my head on the pillow and didn't wake up until ten past nine the following morning.

In the normal course of events, Saturday and Sunday are both work days so far as I'm concerned. When I'm busy on a book I work every day until it is finished

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– and this might mean sitting down to the task without a day off for over two months, sometimes over three, depending on the book.

But at the moment I was between books and I could take time off. Not that I intended to on this particular morning, for I had something to see to; something I had kept from Foster. When I'd accepted the tin of powder I'd planned to take it to a friend of mine who is a chemical analyst. He's one of the band of experts I've built up to help me with technical problems.

I phoned him as soon as I'd finished breakfast and he told me to pop round. He lives only five minutes' walk away and, as the weather had improved greatly, I went on foot, taking the tin with me. Joe – his name's actually Jonah Sneeth – Joe listened to what I had to say, then took the tin.

'I can probably tell you if there's any poison in the stuff; that won't take long. But it'll take a bit more time if it isn't any of the common poisons.'

It took him only a very few minutes. I'd told him to try first of all for arsenic, and he struck it right away. 'Mind you, Philip,' he said earnestly, 'I can't tell you yet if there's enough in there to make up a fatal dose.'

That didn't matter, not at this stage. I'd confirmed my suspicion – or, rather, Leslie Foster's suspicion. And now there was going to be the painful business of telling him. Or should I? Wasn't it my duty to get in touch with the police first, to let them know what I'd found out? I declined Joe's offer of a whisky and

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set out for home, trying to reach a decision about informing the police. The more I thought about it the more sure I was that I should get in touch with Detective-Inspector Warren, without delay. This was a case of murder and attempted murder; it was no place for me. So – the police it should be, as soon as I could get to my telephone.

Actually, I didn't have to wait that long. There was a dark, official looking car parked outside my front door, and as I drew level with it, Warren stepped out of the vehicle.

'Good morning, sir. We've been waiting for you. I wonder if it would be convenient to have a little talk with you?'

He was as suave as ever. 'Surely. Come in.' As I opened the front door of my house another detective emerged from the car and the two of them went into the hall and waited there for me to guide them. I took them through to the sitting-room and got them settled.

'Well, Mr. Warren, what can I do for you?'

The other man produced a shorthand notebook and pencil. Warren waited until he was ready, then turned to me. 'There are one or two points I hope you will be able to help us over, sir.'

'Go ahead.'

'Very well, sir. The first thing I'd like to know is : how long have you known Mr. and Mrs. Tom Foster?'

Tom Foster? That was presumably Poddy. 'Just a few days.'

'You're sure of that, sir?'

‘Of course I am.’

Warren stared at me levelly. ‘I will be quite frank with you, sir. Thomas Foster was murdered.’

I gaped at him. Surely no detective could have made such a silly error! ‘But how do you make that out! I mean, I saw the glass . . .!’

‘Oh! The glass.’ The two detectives exchanged glances. ‘It’s because of the glass, sir,’ Warren went on, ‘that we know it’s a case of murder. You see, sir, it had been wiped clean. There were no fingerprints on it.’

It took me a few moments to register, but the shock the news had given me was as nothing compared with what was to come.

‘Mr. Carver,’ he continued, ‘we would like to know what you were doing, examining a tin of weed-killer in Leslie Foster’s greenhouse?’

‘I was just looking at it.’ Jackley must have told them about the incident.

‘Isn’t that a funny thing to do?’ His face was blank of all expression. ‘Surely you must have had a reason?’

Very obviously it was time for me to tell the whole story. No good purpose could be served by keeping my knowledge to myself any longer. Indeed, if I did so, I might well find myself in a jam with the police. But before I could start, the Inspector gave me a warning.

‘We don’t want it to appear that I have tricked you into a statement, Mr. Carver, so I’ll tell you what the situation is. First, as I’ve already told you, Thomas

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Foster was murdered – poisoned. Second, we have information that he was in your bedroom the night before he died, pleading with you. Third, you were seen coming from *his* bedroom, at or about the time he died.’

‘Hey, wait a minute! You’ve got it all wrong!’ Someone must have been lying, although they might have been genuinely mistaken. They’d probably seen me moving away from Poddy’s door, after I’d been listening there. ‘In any case, what about his wife? She must have been there, in bed.’

‘Exactly so, sir.’ This time his voice almost purred and I looked at him in horror.

‘You – you’re not thinking that Belinda . . . Belinda and me . . . ! Haven’t you asked her? She’ll tell you the truth.’

‘She is under sedation, sir. Doctor’s orders. She won’t be able to speak for another forty-eight hours at least.’

Even though I knew I could prove my innocence, that still didn’t stop me from breaking out in a cold sweat. ‘Look, man, this is ludicrous. All right, I looked at that weed-killer, but that couldn’t have been the stuff that was used. The colouring’s put in specially, to make it obvious. You couldn’t feed that to anyone, or get them to drink it.’

‘Not if it was served in a *green* glass, sir?’

The mental picture the words conjured up, of Poddy’s body on the bathroom floor, and the green-tinted tooth glass, gave me the worst jolt yet. And he



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continued to put on the pressure. 'I must also remind you, Mr. Carver, that you were alone with the corpse for some time before a police officer arrived on the scene.'

He paused. 'And that you were in Griffiths' office, without authority, not too long before he died – also from poison.'

Good God! Did they really suspect me? Certainly what he'd said made what sounded a fairly convincing chain of circumstances. I knew that if I were in his shoes, I'd be the Number One suspect. It was time to talk. But first I had to have a drink – and it wouldn't be either tea or coffee.

'I'd better make a full statement.'

'That might be wise, sir.'

'I'll need a drink. Will you have one?'

They both refused. I poured myself about four fingers of Scotch over a couple of ice cubes, took a sip and was then ready to confess to my miserable role in the events.

I told them everything that had taken place from the time I got the first invitation to the dinner. They listened intently, without once interrupting me, the sergeant scribbling busily away, his pencil making a squeaking noise from time to time. I must have talked for an hour, and when I'd finished I knew what a poor impression the tale must have made, for now Warren had some emotion visible in his face.

'So you're also an amateur detective, Mr. Carver, in addition to your other activities.' The scorn in his

voice made me writhe. 'I hope you succeed rather better with your writing than you do in solving *real* crimes.' •

'All right, I deserved that,' I admitted, 'but let's not dwell on it. What do we do next? After all, you must admit that what I've just told you will be of *some* help.'

'As to that, sir, we'll have to wait and see . . . But I think perhaps we'd better get back to see Mr. Foster. I'll have to ask you to accompany us, sir, if you don't mind.'

I did mind, but there wasn't much I could do about it. I didn't want to make myself into an even bigger fool by kicking up a fuss and, perhaps, being taken forcibly.

'Very well.'

It was way past lunch-time but I wasn't hungry and if either of them were, they didn't say so. The long drive out to *Red Trees* was made in silence that was broken only by the rumbling protests made by my stomach as it called for food. When we got to Foster's place he himself opened the door to us.

He didn't seem to find it odd that I should come back more or less under police guard. Indeed, he was pleased to see me. He looked anxious, which wasn't surprising, and I knew he wanted to ask me about the tin of anti-acid powder, but he didn't. Inspector Warren was very much in charge and I wasn't going to say anything more, unless I had to.

Foster took us through to his study and on the way

there we met Gwen. She looked dreadful, as though she was ready to collapse at any moment, and I had the feeling that she would be staring after us long after we'd gone out of sight. There'd been no greeting from her; instead, she'd shrunk back as we passed, as though in the hope that she'd be invisible. Her reaction didn't make me feel any happier.

But when we were all in the study I forgot her for the moment as I listened to the story Foster was telling to the two detectives. As he went on I began to feel better, for what he said bore out my tale in every respect. Once again the Inspector proved himself an excellent listener; not once did he interrupt to put a question, or to clarify anything Foster said.

'And that's all there is to it, Mr. Warren,' he concluded. 'I gave Carver the tin, and that was the last time I saw him until now.'

I mentally gave thanks that his memory was such a good one, for what he had told them seemed to make the two officers lose interest in me, and Warren confirmed this belief by what he said next :

'You don't believe that Mr. Carver had anything to do with the deaths, sir?'

'Inspector, you are too intelligent a man really to think he had anything to do with the fatalities!' Good old Foster, he was going all pedantic again, getting into his normal stride. 'In any case, he was not in the house at the time of Mrs. Bray's death. Indeed we did not know each other at that time.'

Warren nodded, as though the words were precisely

what he had expected to hear. 'Of course, sir.' There was a long silence before he asked his next question : 'Mr. Foster, you said you have never asked your wife to buy any ordinary white arsenic?'

'Of course I told you that, because it's the truth. I must say, I don't see what you are getting at.'

'I think, sir, perhaps Mr. Carver should leave the room.'

Colour flooded into Foster's cheeks. 'No. I prefer him to stay.'

Warren shrugged. 'I must warn you, sir, that what I have to say next may well be – painful.'

'I wish Mr. Carver to be present.' The words were snapped out.

'Very well, sir, as you wish. Perhaps you would be good enough to summon Mrs. Foster – your wife, sir?'

At that moment I'd have given anything to get out of the room. I knew exactly what was going to happen; I was willing to bet that I could predict Warren's next words almost precisely.

The playwright used the house phone on his desk to locate Gwen and while we waited for her the tension built up until it felt, to me at least, as though static electricity filled the place, waiting only the slightest movement by anyone present in order for it to discharge explosively. Even the small noise she made when she tapped on the door, sounded like a pistol shot.

Gwen entered, looking even more ghastly than when we had seen her in the hall, and my heart was wrung

with pity for her; no matter what she'd done, she was paying for it.

Warren was polite and solicitous, settling her in a chair where, once she was sitting, she seemed to shrink. Her gaze moved, frightened, from one to the other of us and then quickly away as though she dare not look at anyone for more than a split second.

'I would like to ask you one or two questions, Mrs. Foster,' Warren's voice sounded softly sympathetic. The man could use it beautifully; it must have been a great asset to him in his career.

'Y - yes?' Hers, by contrast, you could barely hear.

'Only one or two small points, madam. First, have you ever made a purchase of poison?'

Was she going to deny it? I held my breath, waiting for her reply. But although she gave Foster a quick, scared glance, she didn't lie. 'Yes.'

'For what purpose?'

'I don't know.' Her voice was stronger now. 'My husband asked me to buy it.'

Warren, the sergeant and I all turned to look at Foster. He was staring at her open-mouthed, dumb-founded.

## FIFTEEN

AFTER what seemed an age, Foster forced a laugh. 'Darling, that memory of yours! I never did such a thing.'

'But you did! You *must* remember.' She was really frightened now.

There was another awful silence, then Foster managed another laugh, which sounded even more false than the first. 'Of course!' He slapped his forehead with the open palm of his right hand. 'I'd forgotten. Of course I did!' He turned eagerly to Warren. 'I remember perfectly. There were some – some rats. Yes, that's it! Rats. I wanted to get rid of them. So I asked Gwen to get me something to kill them with.'

It was horrible to watch. He was trying desperately to convince the detectives he was telling the truth, but he was a dismal actor. It would have been obvious even to a half-wit that he was trying to cover up for her sake. Pathetic though it was, I felt sick, for now Gwen was relaxed. Evidently she thought his word was sufficient to clear her.

But now I had a new fear. I was sure that Warren was going to arrest her there and then, and I wasn't quite sure that I could have stood being present with-

out making some sort of an exhibition of myself. But, miraculously, Warren didn't take the matter any further 'I see,' he said flatly. Then, a little more brightly : 'Well, that's all I want for the present. Thank you all very much for your co-operation.'

I could have shouted aloud with relief. He wasn't so heartless as I'd assumed. Obviously he was going to make the arrest much more private and I was grateful to him for his consideration, although I didn't know what effect it would have. Certainly Foster now knew that she was guilty; he was trying his best to keep calm, not to break down, but his face was contorted by emotion.

Neither he nor Gwen seemed to notice when I left, escorted by the sergeant. They didn't make any reply when I said goodbye but I didn't wait to repeat it. I was only too glad to get away from the place, out into the open where one could breathe and think.

During the drive home I went over the series of events that had taken place since I had first visited *Red Trees*. Was there, I wondered, anything I had failed to do – was there some action I might have taken that would have changed the course of things? But it was some consolation to know that my intervention wouldn't have altered anything – assuming Mrs. Bray to have been the first victim, Gwen's role had been chosen long before I arrived on the scene.

What must Foster have been suffering! I tried to

picture myself in the same sort of situation – married to Midge and discovering she was an inhuman killer. But it was impossible even to think of her in that light, and when the police car dropped me at my home, and she was waiting for me, I knew what a fool I was even to consider such a possibility.

I told her the whole, rotten story as she started to get some food. My stomach was rumbling, like a volcano and she prepared a sort of high tea to take care of my hunger. When I'd finished my recital she said :

‘That still doesn't rule out Maureen.’

‘Maureen?’ I'd forgotten all about the female. ‘How do you figure that?’

‘She might have been the one who induced Gwen to buy the poison.’

Once again in my life I had to thank Myra for giving me a new light on things. What she'd suggested was so probably the case. Maureen, a dominating character, could have been the one to tell Gwen to buy the poison. Naturally, it didn't make Gwen's crimes any the less heinous, but one could at least pity her more if she was motivated by twisted love, instead of mere greed or hate.

We didn't talk much during the meal. After it was over I felt enormously stronger; able to cope with reality. The main reality I had to face was that I had wasted the time I'd put in on the business. I'd not be able to make use of what I had discovered, for I'd found out nothing except that I was not quite so smart as I had imagined myself.



‘Never mind, darling,’ Myra said. ‘You’ll have to put it all down as experience.’

‘A few more deals like that and I’ll be out of business altogether.’

‘Will you be a witness at the trial?’

‘Warren didn’t say anything about that.’

‘You could get some publicity out of it.’

At odd times I realise that Myra is better at business than I am. ‘Don’t be so heartless!’ But there was no conviction behind the words. All I wanted to do was to forget the whole episode. If I was called as a witness, then of course I should have to go to the trial. But I hoped fervently that the police would manage without me. To see Gwan in the dock, to hear . . . !

Next morning Warren was on the doorstep again. He’d got my statement typed and ready for me to sign. ‘I didn’t want to drag you out, sir,’ he told me. ‘And as I was coming this way,’ he indicated the statement.

I read it through, then signed it. As he took it I managed to get round to asking the question that had been trembling on my lips since the moment of his arrival.

‘There wasn’t anything in the papers, or on the news, Mr. Warren.’

‘You mean there was no news, sir?’ He glanced at me mockingly, making me flush.

‘You know perfectly well what I mean.’

‘I’m not psychic, sir.’

There was no doubt about it, he got me on the raw. But I managed to control my temper. 'If you're too stupid to understand implications, Inspector, I will phrase it very simply : Have you made the arrest yet?'

His lips moved just sufficiently to show me he was smiling. 'There are one or two little points to be put straight before we do any arresting, Mr. Carver.' And with that I had to be content.

There was nothing in the evening newspapers; no mention on the television news, but next day's papers carried a small paragraph which stated that the police had been granted an exhumation order in relation to the body of a woman who had died in Buckinghamshire just over a year ago.

Myra and I conned the paragraph together but there was nothing else. Either the police were being cagey concerning the amount of information they had released, or the full details had been deliberately suppressed. One thing was certain : the news could only have been about Mrs. Bray's body.

I was in the middle of my correspondence when Myra came into the study and told me Warren was in the hall. 'What's he want this time?'

'Me, from the look in his eye.'

'You? Impossible. He's not a man; he's a fish.'

'That's all you know.'

'Okay. Bring him in.'

Maybe she hadn't been so wrong after all, for when she left us I saw his gaze concentrating on her rear view as she went out of the door. I didn't blame him;

I always watch that view myself, for it's well worth it. But I hadn't expected him to appreciate it so obviously.

'Well, Inspector?'

He actually grinned at me. 'I just thought you'd like to know that we've questioned Mrs. Thomas Foster, sir. She's out and about again, and she confirms everything you told us.'

'I'm glad to hear it. Does that mean you won't bother me again?'

'I can't guarantee that, sir, but what makes you ask?'

'There was a news item in this morning's papers. About an exhumation.'

'Ah, that!'

'Yes, that!' I waited, but he wasn't going to volunteer any information. 'I assume it's Mrs. Bray?'

He thought it over for a long time, then admitted it. 'Yes.'

'What happens if you find she died from natural causes?'

'There'd still be the other charges, sir.' He leaned forward and looked as though he was going to let me into his confidence, but at that moment Myra pushed open the door, carrying a tray with cups of coffee. It was very rarely indeed that I didn't get pleasure out of seeing her come into a room where I was, but this time I could have sworn at her for Warren sat back, smiling at her as he took his coffee from her, his confidential air completely gone.

He thanked her, praised the excellence of the brew, then chatted about the weather before watching her intently as she went out. I imagined his lip twitched as he saw the light wiggle she puts into her walk sometimes, when she knows she's being watched. At times like that the little devil should be spanked.

When we were alone again I tried to steer him back to the confidential mood. It took a little time but at last I managed it. He leaned forward again. 'As I was saying, sir, even if Mrs. Bray had died from natural causes, there'd still be the other charges. But as a matter of fact, it looks as though Mrs. Bray's demise was brought about by *unnatural* means.'

'You already know that?'

'Yes, sir, we do. The preliminary reports on the post-mortem are very positive. Mrs. Bray died from being poisoned.'

So Leslie Foster's awful suspicions had been right! I was still thinking about this when Warren interrupted. 'By the way, sir, before I forget. Has Maureen Chase been in touch with you?'

'Maureen? No.'

'Would you have any idea where she might be?'

'Isn't she at Foster's place?'

He shook his head. 'She cleared out, last night.'

It was the last thing I'd expected, but even so I got some satisfaction out of the news. 'Did she think you were going to arrest her?'

Warren's eyebrows shot up in surprise. 'Arrest

Miss Chase, sir? Whatever makes you think we should do that?’

He knew damned well what made me think that, for I’d already told him of my suspicions about her! ‘So you *don’t* think she’s guilty?’

‘Not of murder, sir.’ The way he said it made me realise he’d got Miss Chase adequately summed up. ‘We shall want her as a witness.’

‘You’ll be making your arrest shortly?’

‘We’ve already done that, sir.’

‘What!’

‘You seem surprised, sir, but it’s quite usual to make an arrest when a crime has been committed.’ He was playing with me, taunting me for some reason I couldn’t guess at. Maybe it was just that he didn’t like me.

‘Has she confessed?’

‘Now really, Mr. Carver, you wouldn’t expect me to answer that question, would you!’ He paused, then frowned. ‘Not that I’m sure I understand it. I did hear you correctly, I suppose? You did say “she”?’

*What the hell!* ‘Of course.’

He shook his head slowly from side to side, as though in pity. ‘You don’t think a woman did it, sir? Surely you wouldn’t make that sort of error?’ Oh, he was enjoying himself all right, but not me. I was utterly at a loss.

‘Gwen Foster did it . . . *didn’t she?*’

Warren laughed aloud. ‘I hope not, sir, indeed I hope not, because I’ve arrested her husband.’

My brain felt woolly with shock. 'Foster?'

'That's right.'

'But he was being poisoned!'

'So he was sir. It's quite a well-worn dodge, attempting to make oneself look like a victim.'

'You must be off your head.'

But even as I spoke I knew he wasn't. He was playing with me in much the same sort of way that Foster had played on my sympathy, fooling me all along the line. Yes, I could see it now. It had been Foster who had, somehow, dangled every bit of fresh 'evidence' before my eyes, so that I'd be sure to see it.

'You've realised the truth, haven't you!' His face was alight with malignant pleasure, as he went on. 'You've realised that Foster used you – made a fool out of you. I suppose there's some excuse for you. After all, *he* was a clever craftsman. He must have been planning his revenge on Mrs. Foster ever since the time he found out about her *affaire* with Griffiths.

'Leslie Foster's the sort of man who never forgets, who never forgives. Didn't you realise this, sir? It's plain enough for anyone with eyes to see.'

'All right, Warren, you've made your point.' I just wasn't capable of reprimanding him for insolence; after all, it was primarily my fault. I deserved it, in part at least.

'Good. So long as you understand, sir, and don't meddle in police affairs again.' Now his motivation was quite clear; he didn't care for outsiders trying to solve crimes.

'It'll be a long time before I interfere in another case,' I said fervently.

'Splendid, sir. Just remember to keep your word and I'll be happy.' He got to his feet and I showed him to the front door. When he had wished me good-bye I heard him mutter something as he turned to face the pavement. The words were addressed to the open air and the world in general :

*' Bloody amateurs!'*

I shut the door carefully behind him then kicked it, hard, After which I went limping to Myra for sympathy and solace.

THE END





























